Critical considerations for collaborative online international learning (COIL) practitioners in Higher Education:
South Africa, the Global South and developing spaces

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Abstract

In this paper, we conduct a collaborative autoethnography to guide our reading of text on collaborative, international online projects in higher education and in South Africa. Our reading reveals patterns that speak to critical considerations for those planning projects in the context or from similar positions within the Global South or other developing contexts. As COIL practitioners in South Africa, we reflect on the literature from the unique situatedness of our learning and teaching environments and broader social context. The insights we offer will help us to develop a toolbox that speaks to our positionality as academics and the intersectional dynamics of our sociopolitical subjectivities. Researchers and academics from the Global South and other developing spaces may find that the issues raised may resonate with their own collaborative, online international engagements as we try to speak into the bigger structures that we must consider when we engage in this work.

Keywords: COIL, Decolonisation, Higher Education, Internationalisation

Introduction

Teaching practitioners in higher education are increasingly encouraged to engage in collaborative projects. Many scholars have lauded Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL)[1] and other collaborative projects for facilitating global citizenry and providing third spaces for learning (Guimaraes & Finardi, 2021). Calls for increased internationalisation projects like COIL are supported by models of higher education funding where expanded international aid and other global models pervade within the higher education landscape (Boughey & McKenna, 2021).

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[1] COIL serves as the impetus for the paper, but all instances of international, online learning may apply. We do make this point throughout, but wherever COIL is mentioned, we include reference to all these other engagements as well.

These transformations sit alongside other transformations within the learning and teaching context, especially in developing countries, the Global South[2], and South Africa specifically. Educators are being called to rethink and adapt their practices .

In South Africa, a project of transformation has been an embedded part of social change after Apartheid and the transformation of the curricula in form and content to address social inequalities and legacies of racism. These legacies were made visible within institutional structures such as staffing as well as ideological structures, the latter of which forms the heart of decolonial projects that examine curricula and cultural dynamics of learning and teaching on the continent.

Globally, educational change is a response to technological shifts and disaster management (Videla-Reyes & Aguayo, 2022) – notably the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change. This change also presents the opportunity to address global inequalities in access to education by promoting collaboration between those in different geographic and economic zones, including between the Global North and the Global South. The opportunities that collaborating across spatial and national borders presents is to open otherwise closed systems of knowing to those who previously would have been excluded.

Variously referred to as internationalisation, COIL, internationalisation at home (IaH), Internationalisation at a distance (IaD), Virtual exchange (VE), and others, the efforts to internationalise curricula and create cross-cultural engagement is a growing medium for learning and teaching. So, while each of these efforts may vary in content or form, they share in promises to enable students on the African continent[3] access to spaces of learning that may previously have only been possible with mobility projects. In this paper, we seek to explore the promises of COIL and similar projects while also critically reflecting on what it would take to achieve truly collaborative engagements that facilitate the kind of promises that have made COIL such a highly valued addition to learning and teaching on the continent and within the higher education sector broadly. The result is a deep engagement with areas that offer a toolbox for COIL and other educational practitioners that will allow us to critically reflect on the scholarship of our learning and teaching 'projects'[4].

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[2] Global South is used in this paper to refer to developing contexts outside of Western educational spaces. Elsewhere, this term may overlap ideas of developing nations, third world, etc., but we have chosen to primarily speak of the Global South as it speaks to a geo-political divide that is a helpful lens to think about the 'spaces' we come from. As we have noted, all practitioners, regardless of origin, must consider the needs of their own and their partner/s' spaces.
We also wish to problematise the ways that global understandings of "underdevelopment" have positioned countries in the Global South relative to "develop" spaces and global power. Such positioning is not unimportant for the relations also between COIL students.

[3] As practitioners from South Africa, we want to reimagine engagements that support learning in our context and across the continent that recognise and nurture African knowledge practices.

[4] Project here is in line with COIL rhetoric that speaks of collaborative practice in terms of its outcomes.

Mode of enquiry

We employed collective autoethnography (CoAE) to explore and capture our critical perspectives on how COIL has been positioned in literature. As COIL practitioners our mode of enquiry synthesises our critical reflections and a reading of text that spoke into the local and broader context in which we find our practice.

Dyer, et al. (2024) recognise collective autoethnography as a narrative methodology that "stories" the vignettes, collective reflections and critiques that collaborators bring together in conversation with each other. This approach rests on collectively immersing oneself in a "data set" and gives value to the collective voices of those in conversation. Such value is in line with qualitative traditions of enquiry and resists positivist and colonial undertakings that prescribe fixed and measurable knowledge making practices (Gachago, et al., 2024).

As collaborators and colleagues at the same institution, we have participated in COIL projects together since the start of the academic year in South Africa 2023. Since then, we have met regularly to reflect on the outcomes for our students and for higher education. During this time, we have presented ideas collaboratively in multiple forums and developed critical perspective/s that underpin our engagement[5]. We come from different backgrounds:

- Tarryn is a lecturer and scholar with a background in Psychology. Her interest in student development, narrative theory and identity underpins her interest in COIL on the continent.
- Sphelele teaches journalism at a University of Technology, focusing on newswriting and digital journalism. His scholarly interests are journalism education, social and gender justice, and critical pedagogy.
- Andrea is a former speech-language therapist working as a writing centre practitioner in a large urban university of technology. Her scholarly interests include writing centre pedagogy, the student experience of HE and visual higher education studies.

This paper is a synthesis of oral conversations we had over this time and a critical, collaborative reading of literature in the field. Such collective input, first orally and later in written drafts of the areas we present in this paper, has strengthened our individual reflections and thus grows the insights from an autoethnographic approach. The richness of bringing a multiplicity of voices together is a key strength of this mode of enquiry (Gachago, et al., 2024). Below is a schedule of our meetings and activities. We chose to write collective reflections on the sections which risks conflating our voices but we shared key values and perspectives that are captured in our work.

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[5] Who we are is a wholly important subject in its own right and deserves attention regarding our subject-positioning in relation to who our students are and what they can know. This question underpins our thinking on power later in the paper.

Table 1: Collaborative engagements

Date	Activity
28/02/2024 – 01/03/2024	Initial meeting; conducted literature search individually and shared collectively.
	Writing was shared:
	Tarryn wrote the section on Promises of COIL and power
	Sphelele wrote the section on Preparedness and Engagement
	Andrea wrote the section on Logistics
	All writing was informed by discussions around what the literature was showing. Conversations allowed a reviewing of all contributions toward the goal of a collective voice.
21/10/2024 – 23/10/2024	Draft paper was presented and revised in communication with all
19/11/2024	Paper submitted for publication
05/03/2025 – 31/05/2025	Revisions on submitted work received; conversations and revisions shared
14/05/2025 – 15/05/2025	Met in person to discuss revisions and navigate the tasks. Tasks were shared with everyone sourcing literature and conversation about how to handle conceptual revisions.
	Sphelele and Andrea made comments on the paper and edited.
	Tarryn refined final submission and submitted.

The paper was developed in this iterative, and deeply collaborative way to explore shared views on the work we have done in COIL. In this paper, we collectively explore the promises of COIL toward unpacking thematic areas that provide a toolbox for future praxis, namely: power; preparedness and engagement; and logistics which inform a critical scholarship of teaching and learning in our context.

Promises of COIL

Universities in South Africa are being tasked with engaging in collaborative online projects. These projects foster internationalisation that strengthens the skills that students can develop for international competence and to compete in a global workforce. Zhang and Giralico-Pearlman (2018: 1) note that '[i]n today's global society, higher education institutions are charged with preparing students to be world citizens who possess holistic perspectives on diverse international cultures'. This imperative aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (UN General Assembly, 2015), which are used to justify a range of cross-border academic collaboration projects, including COIL, as universities attempt to navigate global and local markets. It is clear that '[e]ducation is essential for improving the capacity of these people [sic] to address environmental and development issues, which are inextricably tied to sustainable development' (Agbedahin, 2018: 678).

COIL and similar projects are defined by the ways that they allow for digital, international engagement between multi-national, multi-cultural and/or multi-linguistic groups that fosters a sharing of knowledge and cross-cultural competence. These projects are characterised by a shared syllabus (DeWinter & Klamer, n.d.), co-teaching, and co-learning, which involves co-planning, co-instructing and co-assessing diverse students (Rodolico, et al., 2022).

Students may benefit from input from the two academic sites – their home institution and the partnering institution – that participate in each project, as well as interactions with staff, student-to-student interactions and experiential and collaborative learning that COIL and similar projects allow (Zhang & Pearlman, 2018). For Naicker, et al. (2021), students' experiences are central to ensuring that COIL and other online international learning are effective and realise their potential for building truly international, intercultural and global classrooms. The context-specific experiences illustrate how COIL can function as a third space for teaching and learning. If we think of the first space as being about curriculum and "what" students learn, the second space as being about "who" and "how" content is delivered, then the third space focuses on "where" knowledge exists and who can access privileged or disparate sites of learning (Wimpenny, et al., 2022). One of the central features of COIL and other international projects is that they facilitate learning across geographical divides by allowing students access to the places of knowledge that may previously only have been possible with costly exchange and mobility projects. However, they raise concerns about inclusion and the ways that student inclusion may hold up the promises of COIL. This idea of new ways of inclusion is expanded by Zhang and Giralico-Pearlman (2018: 2) who write that in present day HE classrooms the lecturer is challenged to move away from a central role which is largely 'teacher-centred and content focused' to engage in learning and teaching which seeks to be 'more engaging, interactive, applicable, collaborative, and international' and where process is valued over end-product (Zhang & Giralico-Pearlman, 2018: 2). This shift leads to classroom environments with more fluid roles where all participants are 'members of a learning community, within which they learn from each other, and grow together during the learning process' and in which 'student-centred learning, applied learning, interdisciplinary study, learning community building and international learning' are valued (Zhang & Giralico-Pearlman, 2018: 2).

To the fluidity of learning and teaching roles in higher education, COIL adds additional dynamics related to technological advancement and engagement across cultural boundaries. This third pedagogic approach or 'third space' has been lauded for its potential to skill learners for global markets and prepare global citizens who 'possess holistic perspectives on diversity and inclusion' (Zhang & Giralico-Pearlman, 2018: 2). These bold claims are the subject of much engagement in educational literature where scholars in the area are, rightly, curious as to what this means for higher education, especially on the continent. Wimpenny, et al. (2022: 279) question in what ways COIL (as an example of a collaborative project):

> is being integrated into higher education curricula to interrupt western hegemony and open up spaces in which "otherwise" ways of knowing, being, relating and expressing can

thrive. We consider COIL as a Third Space within which academics can help facilitate the different intellectual, emotional, and socio-cultural positionings of Global South-North students and reflect on how meaning-making and engagement can be transformed as a result of this dialogue.

Wimpenny, et al.'s (2022: 279) question pivots against assumptions of the virtues of collaborative projects. How and in what ways do collaborations benefit learning and those in the Global South? It is important that we do not take the experiences of students in these projects for granted or risk entrenching power through unreflexive engagement. Similarly, the findings of O'Flaherty and Liddy (2018) who conclude that education that addresses sustainable development, while '"welcoming" positive reviews from students, must expand its analysis to consider the complex, qualitative dynamics related to ontology, epistemology and methodology of learning tools and innovate regarding best practice for the future. That is, when much is promised, how do we ensure that practical measures are best suited to meeting the expectations for truly collaborative engagements across geographic divides. These engagements may also be shaped by diversity that extends beyond cultural and linguistic difference/s (which are by no means unimportant) to include the impact of economic, social and ideological differences, all of which must be carefully understood and managed in the learning and teaching project.

In this paper, we unpack the promises of international exchanges and explore the critical considerations that higher education practitioners who engage in COIL must engage with in their practice. Such considerations offer much to the curriculum development space. Our contributions within the collective autoethnography mode speak directly to curriculum development around COIL. How and in what ways are those undertaking COIL guided to consider the factors within their own and partners' learning contexts? Multiple authors speak to concerns related to the design and implementation of COIL here and elsewhere (Vahed, 2022; Błach & Klimontowicz, 2024). This paper acknowledges the need to unpack key tenets of curriculum design such as 'authentic learning environments' (Prakashchander, et al., 2024), 'global and intercultural competencies' (Prakashchander, et al., 2024), 'equal contributions' and the 'co-creation of learning' (Bovill, 2020) among others. There is a view in curriculum development that COIL responds to inequality within the global knowledge project (Vahed & Jiatong, 2024). A broader guide on curriculum planning for COIL is useful when planning curricula (Rubin & Guth, 2023) especially where COIL engagements are necessitated by urgency like responding to pandemics or other restrictions on mobility.

By unpacking the promises of COIL our critique, however, resists a one-size-fits-all approach to COIL as reductionist and potentially falling into the same traps that we have identified already regarding western, colonial hegemony and how it plays out in higher education. We recognise that practitioners need to engage in deep, reflexive praxis which is not best positioned within existing ways of doing things. It needs time and care that is responsive to the local environments and students. Such notions are not often included in higher education literature to be tabulated for funding models and other support. Our work aligns instead with

teaching and learning philosophy that supports critical readings of teaching as a 'social practice'; promotes concepts such as 'Ubuntu' (Ngubane & Makua, 2021) and (Ubuntu-)'Currere' (Hlatswayo & Shawa, 2020) in local teaching environments and rests on principles aligned with 'Teaching to trangress' (hooks, 1994). Operationalising these in our environments will result in multi-pronged, dynamic moments for educators and scholars and is a space for ongoing research and scholarly input.

Critical considerations

Academics tend to agree that students benefit from international exposure. This has resulted in scholarships and mobility being an embedded part of higher education around the world over a long time, allowing students to benefit from knowledge that may otherwise remain inaccessible due to sheer geographic distance. Internationalisation has long been operationalised through recruiting students through travel to institutions of higher learning, particularly in the 'West', or Global North (minority world), including the United States, Europe and Australia (Tight, 2022). Thus, internationalisation has reinforced the position of 'Western', 'overseas' institutions as having a privileged status in international knowledge making[6].

With the development of technologies that allow for live communication around the world, support for virtual engagements has seen growing support, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic where education had to rely on online engagements, if not transitioning to emergency online learning. The increasing support for such initiatives expands access to international exposure for larger groups of students, and this is an opportunity that would otherwise be both logistically unfeasible and environmentally harmful. The Global South, particularly, may be well positioned to take up opportunities where resource poor institutions may benefit from collaborations with their colleagues elsewhere. The great hope is that this opens doors that constraints on funding historically may have left closed. In doing so the playing field is at once opened up and levelled. A doxic understanding of the value of collaborating internationally for learning and teaching might be that it enriches and extends our students' experiences, creates cross-cultural awareness and competence (West, et al., 2022).

While we certainly critically examine this hope and question the benefits of international exposure, we must acknowledge that these assumptions underpin internationalised and virtual student engagements like COIL One of the reasons is that COIL is often mandated by education policy, institutional management and strategic goals (Rubin, 2017). However, the landscape of international, virtual, and COIL exchanges and engagements is complex. The figurative border

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[6] Homi Bhabha (citied in Bhandari, 2022) makes the point that a 'Third space' within pedagogic and cultural spaces necessitates the questioning of colonial domination and contesting essentializing identities. We argue that in operating as a Third space these same engagements underpin Higher education and COIL endeavours also to ask what privileges students bring to COIL? What socio-economic dynamics, positionalities, epistemologies and taken for granted ways of learning do our students come with and, who and what is positioned as the 'ideal'. Without engaging with these questions, we risk reifying colonial and uncritical patterns and ways of being, thinking and doing.

crossing that this work entails traverses many conceptual and philosophical territories, some of which are fiercely protected and policed. In this paper, we acknowledge contributions by theorists who share our interest in critically examining the policies and practices of COIL, while also centring the learning and teaching project and students' embodied experiences. We acknowledge also that these and other practitioners may also be walking a minefield of political, financial and other complexities that shape when and how they can do this work. We want to acknowledge that much has been written on internationalisation, virtual exchange (VE), internationalisation at home (IaH), or Internationalisation at a Distance (IaD) (Mittelmeier, et al. 2020), and COIL that may intersect or diverge from our analysis.

We want, however, to step back and ask why COIL and similar projects are valued in the way they are so that we can critically examine their practice without inviting in the very same prejudices and divisions that we hoped they are positioned to address. Specifically, do students benefit from international exposure and does it support access to knowledge? Do we risk diminishing local knowledge practices when we value those elsewhere? A nuanced and critical examination of why this form of education is valued in our higher education offerings is valuable as we ask: Why do we value virtual, international collaborations like COIL, and what is it doing for us, as educators and our students?

In this way we ask as Schultz (2011) cited in Clifford and Montgomery (2017: 1) does. 'whose perspectives were being privileged in defining an internationalised curriculum and what constituted a transformed curriculum'; and in doing so highlight how 'indigenous knowledges and the positionings of marginal and diaspora peoples have been widely overlooked in internationalisation of curriculum practices, and these perspectives need to be become integral to discussions of future tertiary education policies and curricula'.

Our questioning of the taken-for-granted benefits of COIL include questions that speak to:

- How our praxis is a response to the lived realities of our context where experiences of unpredictability, violence, poverty and deprivation may be experienced only on one side of the collaboration and what this means for how cognitive and emotional labour is carried by both parties.
- What kinds of social, literary and linguistic practices may be required (Chabrak & Craig, 2013), especially as the project foregrounds communication against language differences and a reliance on languages, such as English, which already speaks to global positions of power.
- How is student agency, adaptability, resilience (Theron, 2016), and rebellion accounted for in the project design and implementation to speak into student situatedness, embodied experiences and communal knowledge-making practices.
- How is success defined for academics and learners, and in what ways is success seen through the lens of learning and teaching or funding and career development?

We examine three interrelated aspects of COIL that appear in the literature as critical considerations. We tease out their role here in relation to our positionality as COIL practitioners from the Global South and specifically South Africa but offer these to practitioners in every context who necessarily navigate the tensions of recognising the contexts of their students in international projects. The three areas are power, student preparedness, and logistics. These are not exclusive areas for consideration, nor do they exist in isolation from each other, but for this paper, they form a triad of three important areas for interrogation that will be unpacked in more detail.

Power

It should go without saying that our students meet each other as diverse, heterogeneous groups from multi-cultural and multi-linguistic backgrounds. Lessons from educational literature in South Africa and elsewhere, driven more recently by conversations about decolonial pedagogy and Africanisation, centre on an analysis that sees these differences as meaningful to the (transformative) learning and teaching project – not just for the content of what is included in syllabi but also who teaches, when and how. In examining intersectionality within university classrooms, we must also consider how international partners (ourselves included) – both students and academic staff – present embodied, situated ways of knowing that may support some ways of knowing over others.

Literature supports the examination of moments of intersection in academic engagement. These moments may be understood as interactions, co-constructions or transformative moments in relationship-rich education (Felten & Lambert, 2020). Considering intersections (Zenger & Pill, 2022) in virtual, collaborative engagements opens conversations related to how situatedness with 'others' drives student learning. In doing so, this paper recognises the critical work of Crenshaw (cited in Harris & Patton, 2019) and others who map intersectionality in social hierarchies. For example, "intersectionality's insistence on examining the dynamics of difference and sameness has played a major role in facilitating consideration of gender, race, and other axes of power in a wide range of political discussions and academic disciplines, including new developments in fields such as geography and organizational studies" (Cho, et al., 2013: 787).

In particular, race, class, gender and nationality are already key features of the social landscape in South Africa and may play a role in how students can interact with others in (virtual) classroom/s. These intersectional factors are recognised as contributing to the dynamics of power related to who speaks and what is possible to be said. Ultimately, we must tackle how power is reinforced or challenged in the ways students interact across difference[7].

While power relations exist in the relations between individuals, the work of intersectionality also locates this as systemic structures that shape engagements between persons. For this reason,

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[7] Derrida's notion of 'differance' speaks to the ways that meaning is constructed to navigate 'us' and 'them'; what is present and what is unspoken within language and systems of thought (Sampson, 1989). Unpacking the power embedded in engagements necessitates an understanding of these processes and is a part of the researcher's ongoing research writing in the area.

power relations are critical when international collaborations are between the global North and the Global South or between developed and developing nations. Such notions of geopolitical location are themselves imbued with power as to how and when these are used and by whom but offer helpful lenses through which partners may negotiate their positionality in relation to each other. Martins (2020: 135), speaking specifically to gender equity, offers some appropriate tools for thinking about the North-South divide and what must be considered in trying to achieve developmental equity:

> This article examines equity in development from four different perspectives: language, knowledge production, funding and partnerships, recognising that if we are to reimagine development in a genuine rather than cosmetic way, we need to address the root cause behind global inequity and grapple with entrenched power imbalances. By explicitly using the term 'equity' in the context of reimagining the global development system, we both acknowledge this reality and make explicit the fact that a rebalancing or power relations and global resources is necessary if we are to achieve a more equal global system.

Each of the areas recognised by Martins (2020) speaks to collaborative educational projects as well. That he identified language, knowledge production, funding and partnerships speaks specifically to the core of international, collaborative engagements such as COIL and others and he asserts that these are often areas where the Global North attempts to 'do' something to and for the Global South (Martins, 2020) so that true collaboration or ownership by stakeholders is mitigated and/or the status quo remains unchallenged. It may be a worthwhile project to quantify the cross cultural 'dimensions' of culture, time etc that mark the differences between spaces (Hofstede, 2001) but we need to acknowledge that the educational landscape is not an even playing field.

Boughey and McKenna (2021) argue the uneven terrain of collaborative projects about funding and show how, among other things, shared ideology and cultural dominance are built into collaborative models so that one party gets to shape what counts as 'good knowledge' at the expense of social justice needs within the context and within the broad goals of collaborating. In particular, these hierarchical engagements appeared to reinforce the Cartesian mind-body dualism in knowledge production that in itself privileges some kinds of knowing and engagement over others. Students' lived realities and embodied experiences hold less favour, as learning is a directional activity from North to South.

Blackie and Luckett (2024) see as the goal of knowledge production the epistemic insight that comes from confronting embodied subjects of learning. They write that '[e]pistemic insight seeks to develop metacognition in order to develop the quality of self-awareness and knowledge of knowledge necessary to be able to bring different subjects into conversation with one another' (Blackie & Luckett, 2024: 1). This 'knower awareness' because of reflexivity, is necessary in all engagements within collaborative knowledge production spaces from everyday classroom interactions between academic staff and students as well as international projects. Epistemic

insight could, therefore, be an answer to intersectional and power differentials but also relies on embodied encounters that recognise human learning outside of machine models.

Recommendations for practical planning for mitigating power issues in COIL projects, could include asking yourself and your partner (COIL co-facilitator):

- Who speaks, when and how?
- What socio-political backgrounds do my students come from, and how might they interact with those of their partners?
- How can we capture students' embodied understandings?
- In what ways can students be emboldened or empowered to speak for and/or against ideological and cultural hegemony?

In asking and answering these questions, it may be useful to allow students to participate in defining and expressing their ontological realities and to shape the epistemological and methodological landscape within the engagement that may best speak to their embodied and lived knowledge systems.

Preparedness and engagement

Thinking about, articulating and implementing epistemic insight put students' embodied experiences at the heart of teaching and learning. Student engagement is a critical learning and teaching component (Li & Xue, 2023). Student engagement is a necessary priority in progressive pedagogies seeking to give students an active role in the classroom (Garton & Wawrzynski, 2021; Owusu-Agyeman & Moroeroe, 2023). Such pedagogical practices acknowledge student agency in curriculum and affirm the validity of their voice and experiences they bring into the classroom (Leite, et al., 2022; Monteiro, et al., 2022; Mbati, 2021). COIL, by its nature, thrives on open and vibrant engagements among the students who are located in two different geographies (Vahed & Rodriguez, 2021). Literature shows that, generally, South African students would approach the space with enthusiasm and seek to open to their counterparts, particularly about the cultural richness in South Africa (Naicker, et al., 2021; Wimpenny, et al., 2022).

Whilst this is the case, walking such unfamiliar paths could still be nerve-wracking, and this is true for students in South Africa when starting with participation in a COIL project (read Naicker et al., 2021). Students may have all the necessary applied skills to take on the opportunity; however, COIL practitioners may want to consider the emotionality of student preparedness as they approach this platform for cross-border interaction.

Naicker, et al. (2021: 500) rightly point out that students' understanding and appreciation of 'multiple cultural perspectives and establish[ment] of positive interactions with people of different national, ethnic, religious, social or cultural backgrounds' is essential when participating in COIL. However, whilst these considerations are important, Global South students' posture concerning the socio-political and socioeconomic complexities of their context as they engage with their Global North counterparts is worth critically considering. While in some COIL projects,

students are seen traversing socioeconomic tensions (see, for example, Banerjee, et al., 2023), in some instances, there could be a power play when students coming from two countries of differing socioeconomic development status come together on a platform (Ramírez, 2020). Therefore, how can COIL practitioners ensure that challenges characterising their Global South context do not get in the way of students' confidence as they approach the COIL platform to interact with students who may have no knowledge or appreciation of the (Global South) challenges? Having navigated the complexities of COIL between students in South Africa and those in the Netherlands, Naicker, et al. (2022: 506) recommend that students participating in a COIL project are 'prepared' before they commence with their participation, and are afforded a space to debrief after the project has been concluded, 'so that students can have emotional release and closure'. These emotions needing release are built up as students approach the space and while interacting and working on activities, hence the critical need to prepare students for possible emotional labour[8].

As COIL partnering universities are most likely located geographically distant from each other, there are also stark differences in the socioeconomic and socio-political patterns each location bears. These differences may pronounce themselves loudly and vividly when a Global South university collaborates with a Global North institution.

Take, for example, South Africa. The country is entangled in a web of socioeconomic and socio-political challenges (Anwana, 2020; Check, 2023; Shahaboonin, et al., 2023). South Africa is often uncritically positioned as a "developing country", somehow like any other Global South country, already viewed as inferior to the Global North, particularly the Western nations. The perception gets further solidified when considering the stark material conditions and structural realities in the country (Forde, et al., 2021; De Klerk & Dison, 2022; Nkonki-Mandleni, et al., 2021). While the crisis generates from the macro level, and is beyond the students' immediate control, South African students and/or students in South Africa, in all likelihood, would be attached to the perception formed about the country (read, for example, Addae & Quan-Baffour, 2022; Madula, 2018; Van der Merwe, 2022; Ogunnubi & Amusan, 2018). Their geography is probably the foremost consideration about who they are. Confronted with this "burden", students in South Africa, most conceivably, contemplate how they are perceived by their Global North counterparts, as COIL exposes the weaknesses of their context even more. Take, for instance, the issue of load shedding we are addressing in the next section: a Global South student would have to logically explain to a Global North student that a country with expansive coal deposits in its belly does not have a sufficient electricity supply for its population. For some, it is probably quite straightforward to explain the issue; however, when working in a space like higher education, where there is historical doubt of one's intellect and general academic inefficiency, there is emotionality

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[8] We are not suggesting that socio-economics and socio-political patterns are the only a priori conditions and unavoidable indications for emotional labour. Rather we suggest that these broader systems of meaning are sometimes overlooked in the preparation of students who are unnaturally seen as existing on equal footings or as apolitical beings divorced from their contexts. We wish to see these become features for engagement between partners.

involved. A Global South student may conceptualise a brilliant explanation to account for the dysfunctionality compromising the smooth sailing of a COIL session; however, that could be a burden. Arguably, it requires emotional labour in addition to the navigation of this unfamiliar Third Space. This emotional labour could be exercised either silently, as individuals or as a collective.

When considering challenges during COIL interactions, South African academics writing on their experiences have mostly focused on the logistical barriers like technological challenges, language, and student partner dynamics, (see, Naicker, et al., 2021). Factors requiring critical considerations could further expand to how the presence of these complexities impacts students, their confidence, and their posture towards the expected vibrant, open, and meaningful engagement with their Global North counterparts.

To emphasise, this does not imply absence or lack of agency from the Global South students, but rather an attempt to stabilise the scale as the students meet to interact. It is worth considering students' internalisation of the circumstances and how, as they approach the COIL platforms, these internalisations impact on their posture for this expected student engagement. Furthermore, once the partnering academics are aware of these complexities and students' positionalities, how can they better prepare students for these complexities so as to mitigate the unfair emotional labour from the Global South students?

Recommendations for practical planning regarding preparedness and engagement, could include asking yourself and your COIL partner/s (COIL co-facilitator):

- How do we prepare students for COIL engagements? What do we say, and what assumptions underlie what we say?
- How are students included in COIL projects, before, during and after?
- How are students positioned in relation to the 'other'?
- In what ways do students demonstrate their agency in COIL projects?
- What support is available to those who participate in COIL?

We suggest asking these questions so that practitioners may prepare for and reflect on their engagements at every step but also find ways to build student voices and experiences into the projects from the inception.

Logistics

International projects demand some kind of digital engagement. That such engagement is opened up globally is a marvel of 21st-century technological advancements. The platforms and experience must be understood, however, in a context of unequal access and logistical constraints. If we consider, already, the conceptual and ideological import from partners that reveals power differentials in COIL and similar projects, we must also consider the very real logistical and technical constraints of partnerships. These may include differentials in access to digital learning tools between North–South partners. We must consider, however, that various

contextual factors in every partnership, regardless of the participating partners, must be closely examined for the ways these shape opportunities for learning and teaching.

In what has been referred to as "digital equity", questions related to access to hardware and software must be considered alongside familiarity with ICT systems and structural inequalities that exacerbate limited or poor use of digital communication – including poverty, loadshedding[9], pandemics, and other socio-political challenges. Even within contexts digital divides may be exacerbated by geo-political dynamics like a rural-urban divide so that you may find that students within the same programme may have differential experience of and access to digital platforms and opportunities in what Lembani, et al. (2019) succinctly referred to as 'same course, different access'. The differential access to ICT resources within rural spaces in South Africa was especially evident during the Covid-19 pandemic (Dube, 2020).

In educational literature in the last five years, COVID-19 is a ubiquitous marker for the kind of ways that digital equity (or lack thereof) globally has opened up or closed down opportunities for democratic knowledge participation. Ladson-Billings (2021: 68) is enthused by a 'hard re-set' that might provoke or open up equity in disempowered (racialised) educational spaces after the Covid-19 pandemic. Orsini-Jones and Finardi (2023) expand on four pandemics: 1. Covid-19, 2. Systemic racism, 3. Economic crisis, and 4. Climate crisis. In South Africa post-pandemic conversations have also included reference to the twin pandemics of Covid-19 and gender-based violence (Dlamini, 2020).

That we can talk about multiple pandemics reveals and confirms not only the real lived disparities between groups but the digital constraints that may allow engagement at all. In South Africa, the effects of poverty and violence are often unspoken drivers of social opportunities and, coupled with socio-political factors like loadshedding and student strikes, under-resourced classrooms may exacerbate digital divides and play into ideological hierarchies (established above).

Unreliable power supply and '[e]lectricity load-shedding in South Africa has become a new challenge for students pursuing online learning following the Covid-19 outbreak' (Mthanti, 2023: 161). Pillay, et al. (2023) have shown how loadshedding impacts student performance including assignment completion and lecture engagement. Their early research demands we continue to research the impact of loadshedding to broader populations but even less is known about the ways students in the context access technology like smart phones, stability of data connections, intimidation and peer pressure in residences and priorities with available data streams. Maphalala and Adigun (2021: 10) argue the complex factors that shape e-learning endeavours in the context, including 'a deficit in ICT infrastructure, erratic Internet access, a low level of technical assistance/support, and inadequate training opportunities for e-learning activities on the university's e-learning platform'. So, while e-learning and the kinds of engagement possible

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[9] Loadshedding is a part of an ongoing energy crisis in the region. Even when there are no scheduled power outages, many communities face instability in the power grid experienced as breakdowns and power cuts. The effects of this instability has consequences in all spheres of social life and may have many long-term effects, especially when students miss out on learning as one (among many) consequence.

through such technological access may offer 'educational attainment, equity and social justice' (Maphalala & Adigun, 2021: 10), we must mitigate our hopes with practical planning to address structural and logistical constraints. Responses may include broadening access to high-speed connectivity throughout social spaces as well as institutional support for necessary hardware, software and appropriate training at all levels (Maphalala & Adigun, 2021). Such responses require broad scale support between governmental, telecommunications and educational structures. This has an impact on attempts to incorporate teaching related to the Fourth Industrial Revolution(4IR) (Oke & Fernandes, 2020) as well as e-learning projects of all kinds, especially in response to Covid-19 (Landa, et al., 2021) but not exclusively. Collaborative online projects underscore these same challenges and how they may require intervention beyond what project leaders may be able to address.

In summation, from the South African context, we can show a digital divide that is a multi-layered reflection of social life outside of academic knowledge production spaces where access to, familiarity with and connections may be tenuous, volatile and unpredictable due to a variety of geopolitical and social factors. While these are not ubiquitous to every context, their impact on planning and conducting virtual, collaborative engagements is undeniable and must be considered and managed by those engaging in projects of this kind.

Recommendations for practical planning of the logistics could include (among other, reasonable planning for context-specific variables) asking yourself and your partner:

- When and how students access digital platforms
- What constraints and challenges prevent access before and during collaborative projects
- How might partner/s support inclusion and access to digital platforms (where possible)
- How can all participants reflect on their own digital experience and opportunities?

These questions should inform the planning and operationalisation phases in an iterative fashion to carefully attune material to students' needs and be responsive to how the engagement happens in real time.

Conclusion

By critically interrogating the promises of international engagements and by mapping pedagogical considerations for higher education practitioners we hope to have given scholars a toolbox for reflexive praxis that acknowledges the power differentials between partners and how these may impact on the learning and teaching project.

While each project will need to navigate the specific cultural, disciplinary and geographic dynamics at play in their interactions, it is worthwhile to consider that the promises of COIL for global citizenry and expanded access to spaces of learning are possible only when careful attention is paid to fostering a digital equity that may not exist in the 'natural' order of the world from which students and teaching staff emerge. This may require intellectual and emotional labour that in itself may be unevenly distributed between international partners and students

who should be able to meet each other as equals for the project to succeed. This is not easy or self-evident so it must be built into the process with careful attention and care.

The paper concludes similarly to Boughey and McKenna (2021: 79) that international projects remain useful and productive to undertake, but we must consider the complex dynamics at play and 'the need for ongoing learning as international collaborators work together and for careful reflection on past work as we move forward'.

We hope that the critical considerations we have offered practitioners facilitate the deep reflection that such work entails. All practitioners everywhere are thus invited to use the toolbox to critically reflect on their practice and contribute to decolonial efforts in the service of learning and teaching that benefits all involved in such engagements.

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During the preparation of this work the authors did not make use of any generative tool or service. The authors reviewed and edited the work themselves and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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