

Increasing student engagement with COIL Padlet

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Abstract

Student engagement undoubtedly deserves attention and time of lecturers and researchers. This paper aims to showcase how to increase the engagement of international marketing students with a simple, technology-enhanced course addition based on an online bulletin board (Padlet) collaboration between two universities in different continents.

This conceptual paper provides (a) for other educators a case study, detailing the efficient collaboration of two lecturers in different universities for a joint course design; and (b) for researchers some initial data of increased student engagement.

Keywords: *Student engagement; COIL; international marketing; course design; experiential learning.*

1. Introduction

Engaging students into the learning process is essential for deep learning experiences. In recent decades education thankfully has added new forms to traditional classroom lecturing, where the professors recited theoretical input, explained, and narrated as the central figure in the educational setting. A plethora of interactive methods and technologies, including case-study based teaching, integrating online exercises and games into lectures provide opportunities for student engagement. These innovative forms require certain investments in training and time from the lecturers which can be a limiting factor of a wider deployment. However, due to simple technology-enhanced tools, stimulations of student engagement can be nowadays achieved, even for challenging international education topics.

In this paper we present a course design how to increase the engagement of international marketing students with a simple addition based on an online bulletin board (Padlet) shared between two universities in different continents. A description of the lecturers' collaboration, which was initiated via a Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) between the two universities and involved 40 students, is included. Their joint development of a learning cycle on the topic of cultural difference in the context of marketing is explained in detail. Several observed indicators of increased student engagement are also summarised.

This paper addresses several themes addressed in the conference, namely (a) Globalisation & International, (b) e-learning strategy, and (c) Innovative teaching and learning experiences.

2. Theoretical background and method

In the research community, there is agreement that “student engagement” is a complex phenomenon, with one consensus being on the core dimensions (cognitive, behavioural, and affective/ emotional). (Kuh, 2003, Kahu, 2013, Bond et al., 2020). Even though the exact definition of student engagement and its measurement remains controversial, researchers observed positive impact on students' learning (Fredrick & McColskey, 2012; Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Bowden et al., 2021), with Bond et al. (2020) providing an overview of most used indicators of student engagement per dimensions based on 243 studies. These indicators range from “learning from peers” and “deep learning” for cognitive student engagement, to “participation/ involvement” and “achievement” for behavioural student engagement and “positive interaction with teachers and peers”, “enjoyment” and “interest” for affective student engagement; however to fully understand and measure student engagement, a quantitative analysis of easily measurable indicators may not be enough, and should be accompanied by observations of the learning environment and a better understanding of students' reflections and perceptions (Bond et al., 2020).

The experiential learning theory as introduced by Kolb (1984) stipulates learning as a cycle which creates knowledge through the transformation of students' experience with reflective practice. In a simplified way, the students' learning cycle can be described by the phases of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active implementation, and deep learning is defined as moving from isolated to integrated knowledge. Providing the opportunity to students of strong experiences and stimulation of reflections with links to theoretical related material should achieve the highest level of learning (Kolb & Kolb, 2011). This approach also allows the lecturers to better understand students' learning by observing the students and by reviewing their reflections. The obvious relationship between experiential learning activities and student engagement has been reported by several studies (Winsett, 2016, Li et al., 2019).

International marketing education has a long tradition of using technology to enrich students' learning (Bell et al., 2001), with tools having drastically improved over the years. Hence, sophisticated technology-enhanced international teaching approaches such as COIL have been possible since over a decade, with the aim to bring lecturers and students from remote distances together (Jie & Pearlman, 2018). The integration of experiential learning theory with COIL has successfully been applied to internationalise an entire business school's curriculum and to develop intercultural skills among students (Nava-Aguirre et al., 2019).

This conceptual paper proposes that combining experiential learning theory with the opportunities provided by technology-enhanced online collaboration can efficiently contribute to a positive and interactive environment for students and increased student engagement. Next, the paper provides a detailed course design for International Marketing, enriched by a simple added course activity, namely COIL Padlet.

3. International Marketing course design

The eight public Swiss Universities of Applied Sciences and Arts are closely linked to the economy, culture and society, with their educational concept focusing on providing highly practice-relevant degrees. At the University of Applied Sciences Northwestern Switzerland (FHNW), lecturers experiment on providing students in addition to theoretical knowledge with applicable skills for future jobs. The course design of International Marketing in the BA programme of International Management was up to 2021 based on interactive and theoretical study units. Additionally, due to the COVID travel restrictions students' mobility such as international study abroad was limited. Hence the lecturer in the spring of 2021 explored opportunities to enrich this 12-weeks autumn semester syllabus for students with international experience; the overall aim was to allow students to learn about cultural difference in international advertisements in line with the course objective. The International Office at FHNW provided the contact to a professor at a partner university in the US. The

two lecturers agreed on a lean collaboration for an international exchange for the students, with the additional aim of improving student engagement. The learning experience took place on a shared online space on Padlet which as a website application is an online bulletin board where students wrote their posts and provided comments and reactions to posts of students abroad (called COIL Padlet for this project). The discussions were structured along four tasks and called COIL #1 to #4 (named COIL(s) subsequently). Students were able to receive bonus points (5% of total grade) on providing a reflection on their learning.

Table 1. Summary of adapted International Marketing course design.

| | Original course design | Course addition (COIL Padlet) |
|------------------------|---|--|
| Lecturer's preparation | Prepare students' reading list, prepare lecture content, case studies and exercises | Collaboration between two universities; plan 12-week semester syllabus with every 3 weeks a COIL, specify task descriptions and two-week time windows for activity; create and deploy Padlet before semester start |
| Students' preparation | Prepare reading on international marketing | Prepare for COIL # 3 (selection of a still or video advertisement with a cultural aspect) |
| Study units | Discussion of students' reading; theoretical input from lecturer; case-study group work | Topics on COIL Padlet: COIL #1: Students' interests; COIL #2: Food; COIL #3: "Cultural" advertisement; COIL #4: Religious holidays Reminder to comment on Padlet during two-week time window; time in classroom to allow discussion on COIL Padlet; educational dialogue on students' observations (retrospect); task descriptions on Padlet; reminder for COIL #3 (finding a "cultural "advertisement) |
| Assessment | Exam | Exam; reflection paper (bonus points) |

The asynchronous discussions on the COIL Padlet were planned across the semester (Table 1), involving topics that built on each other. The COIL Padlet website was made available from the beginning of the semester and two-week time windows for working on each active COIL were defined. The time windows were helpful as students did not share the teaching day nor was the curriculum at the two universities fully aligned. Students were able to work in the classroom on the Padlet during the four "COIL" study units (for 20 minutes). Simple tasks, except for COIL #3, were intentionally designed to easily engage students (excerpts from COIL Padlet: "What are your interests?"; "What is a typical food in your culture?").

In line with the experiential learning theory, the lecturer asked the students to reflect after COIL #1 in groups whether they observed more differences or commonalities across the two sets of students (see Table 2). The lecturer synthesised their findings in an educational dialogue with them. For the more involved COIL #3 students had to select a still or video

advertisement with a cultural aspect which they also had to describe with a marketing theory. Two steps (in italics in Table 2), preparation of learning cycle and explicit abstract conceptualisation, were added to the experiential learning cycle by Kolb (1984) to better describe the learning experience of the students and the efforts involved.

Table 2. Mapping of COIL Padlet on experiential learning cycle including effort.

| Experiential learning cycle | COIL Padlet Implementation | Effort for students | Effort for lecturer |
|--|---|---|---|
| <i>Preparation of learning cycle</i> | Set up joint Padlet across two universities, design four common COILs for students | None | Moderate, one day for collaboration (email, calls) of two lecturers |
| Concrete experience | In-class COIL #1, #2 and #4 were built on simple topics on cultural difference | Little, as time was allocated to post/comment | Little, encouraging and reminding students to post and comment |
| Reflective observation | Time allocated in class to reflect in groups on commonalities/ differences across COIL #1 discussions | Little, additionally implicitly | Little, facilitating an educational dialogue to synthesise students' observations |
| Abstract conceptualisation (implicitly) | Students select a suitable "cultural" advertisement in preparation for COIL #3 | Moderate, students to match their learning to COIL #3 | Little, reminding students to find advertisement |
| Active experimentation | COIL #3 on a "cultural" advertisement with a marketing theory | Little, as time was allocated to post/comment | None |
| <i>Abstract conceptualisation (explicitly)</i> | Written reflection (one page) a few weeks after COIL #3 | Moderate, 1-2h to summarise their reflection | Moderate, half-day grading/ providing feedback to students |

To encourage students' abstract conceptualisation, the lecturer created a reflection for students. The prompts (Table 3) were crafted with the aim of encouraging critical reflection, while at the same time allowing students to make connections to marketing theory.

Prompts were structured to help gain insight into the cognitive (Q1, Q4) and affective student engagement (Q2, Q3) dimension, and were based on research related to assessment rubrics from Brock University (Brock University, n.d.), University of Edinburgh (The University of Edinburgh, n.d.) and ongoing work of one of the authors (Miller & Staley, 2023).

Note that the reflection reports are discussed here as a mean for both students (to explicitly conceptualise) and lecturers (to learn about students' development implicitly) and the results are not the central focus of this conceptual paper.

Table 3. Prompts provided to students for their written reflection on COIL #3

| | |
|--|--|
| Reflection on existing marketing knowledge and emotions. | Your experience with the COIL #3: |
| | Q1. What did you know about cultural aspects in promotion before COIL #3? |
| | Q2. How did you feel during the task, and what about the interaction with other students? |
| Connection to academic marketing concept & evidence of development | Your take-aways, learnings from COIL #3 |
| | Q3. Have you learnt anything which you will use for future international marketing tasks? |
| | Q4. Did your understanding of culture change? Does a marketing theory from your reading/ class discussion make more sense now? |

4. Observations and learnings

At the end of the semester, the collaborating lecturers reviewed their individual class observations, including the reflections provided from the students. Overall, they considered the COIL Padlet implementation, following an adapted experiential learning cycle, a success in terms of effort-benefit considerations. As summarised in Table 2, the perceived effort for the added tasks was little, however the benefits were significant. The lecturers were pleased by the positive learning environment created in class due to the COIL Padlet and the level of keenness of students to contribute. They also observed that students actively engaged with each other outside the allocated time in class. Students mentioned that they are interested in more interaction with partner students via synchronous lectures which the lecturers are investigating for future collaborations. They have already shared at their respective universities the observed positive behaviour of the students and the overall course design.

Whereas the behavioural dimension of an increased student engagement was captured directly by the lecturers' observations, they used the reflection reports to gain insight into the cognitive and affective dimensions. Selected quotes from these reports (as shown in Table 4) further support the claim that students were engaged in the COIL Padlet (structure and possible indicators, in brackets, as suggested by Bond et al. (2020)).

Table 4. Selected quotes from students' reflection reports.

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>Cognitive student engagement (Learning from peers, deep learning)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “Personally, it always helps me a lot when I get practical examples of theoretic content. Through the intercultural exchange, I now have examples in mind that help me to <i>internalize the theoretical knowledge</i>.” ● “From the lectures we learnt about high- & low context cultures but from COIL #3 I got to see practical examples of that and how different the communication is <i>which made it easier to understand</i>.” ● “Personally, I perceived the interactions with students of other nationalities during COIL #3 as very insightful. What especially <i>developed during this COIL</i>, was my perspective on the cultural iceberg model, as ...” ● So, thanks to this exchange, <i>I will stop assuming</i> that even if the cultures are similar, there are tools that cannot be used in all countries and that is why I must inform myself first.” ● Also, in terms of academic knowledge COIL has also helped me to <i>deeply understand different ads</i> and how stereotypes and subliminal messages are used. ● “... During the last three years of studies, we had a look at Hofstede’s dimensions... But it was the first time that I have really adapted my thinking and tried to <i>implement the theoretical knowledge</i> when talking to US students.” |
| <p>Affective student engagement (Positive interaction, enjoyment, interest)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “The <i>interaction</i> with the international students is <i>very fascinating</i> and informative. Many students are <i>highly involved</i> into the discussion and give their own experience or expertise through their own cultural lens.” ● “Overall, these COIL tasks have been <i>very fun and insightful</i> to a completely different culture than ours. In combination with our marketing classes, it opens many views on how to reach the target audience ...” ● “... Secondly, this task was <i>fun</i>. The students posted so <i>many amusing ads</i>. Studying interactively like this and keeping in touch with each other helped to ease the difficulty of the pandemic.” ● Overall, I am <i>grateful</i> for having been able to be part of this experience.” |

5. Conclusions

We believe the presented case study should allow international educators to explore similar course designs without much effort and contribute to a wider deployment of modern and technology-enhanced forms of teaching. Further research on measuring student engagement can use the reported lecturers' observations and students' quotes as starting points. Limitations of this paper are the small number of students involved and the explorative approach of this new course design and could be addressed systematically in future projects.

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