



COIL: Collaborative Online Independent Learning

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Themes presented: Global Outlook; Citizenship & Community; Employability; Digital & Information Literacy; Sustainability; Student Focus

What is COIL (Collaborative Online Independent Learning)?

- the engagement of groups of learners in online intercultural interactions and collaboration projects with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations as an integrated part of their educational programmes (O'Dowd, 2018).
- an educational model that connects students and faculty from different countries for collaborative learning and intercultural exchange through online platforms. It promotes virtual mobility by enabling participants to engage in meaningful cross-cultural dialogue without the need for physical travel (O'Dowd, 2018; Rubin & Guth, 2015)



"Despite being more difficult, the COIL experiment was the most fruitful. It allowed me to talk to people from diverse backgrounds and cultures about ethical concerns. It helped me recognise that there isn't always a single "right" ethical response and that learning and development depend on having an open mind to other viewpoints. It also made it easier for me to understand how cultural influences shape people's perceptions of what is just, effective, or moral. These encounters made me see that, in international business, cultural knowledge is not just helpful but crucial." student feedback quotation



Theoretical underpinnings

COIL draws on several overlapping frameworks in education, communication and intercultural learning:

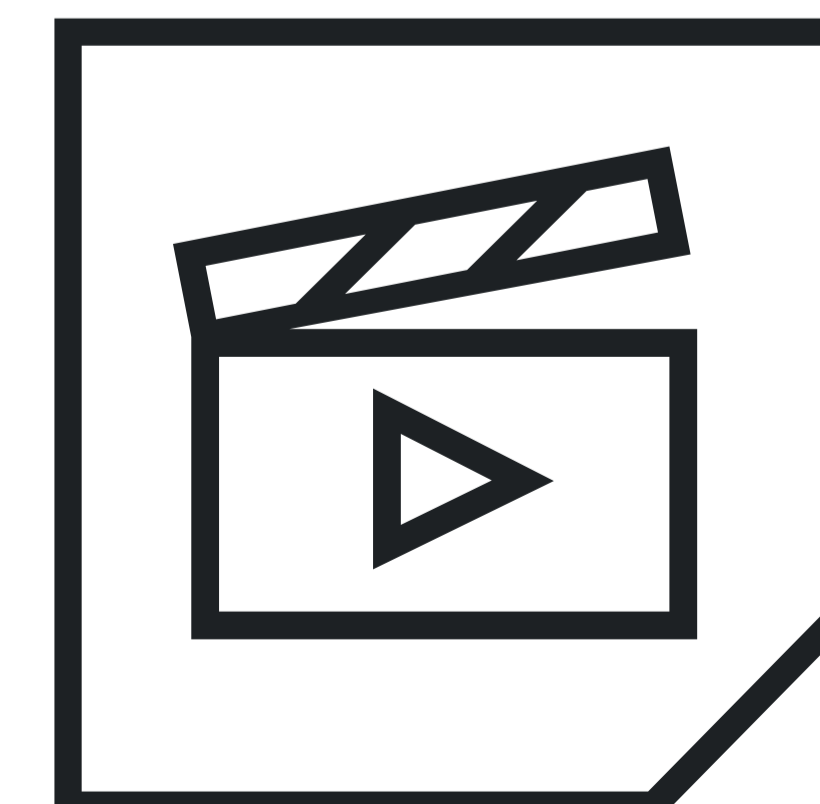
- Constructivist Learning Theory (Vygotsky, 1978)
- Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984)
- Intercultural Competence Theory (Deardoff, 2006; Byram, 1997)
- Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991)
- Connectivism (Siemens, 2005)

What were the instructions for the COIL project?

“You will work together in a group of 6-7 students from universities in Lucerne (Switzerland), Johannesburg (South Africa) and Beijing (China). In your group you will produce a video addressing an ethical dilemma from an intercultural business ethics perspective and you will compare different approaches to ethics as you attempt to solve the dilemma. You will be provided with a choice of case studies to base your work on. Your group will be allocated a mentor from the COIL team and you will receive 2-3 coaching sessions with your group. Your video must be accepted by the COIL panel, before it is released for local grading.

The criteria for being accepted are:

- Length: 8-10 minutes
- MP4 format
- Ethical and cultural analysis of the case”

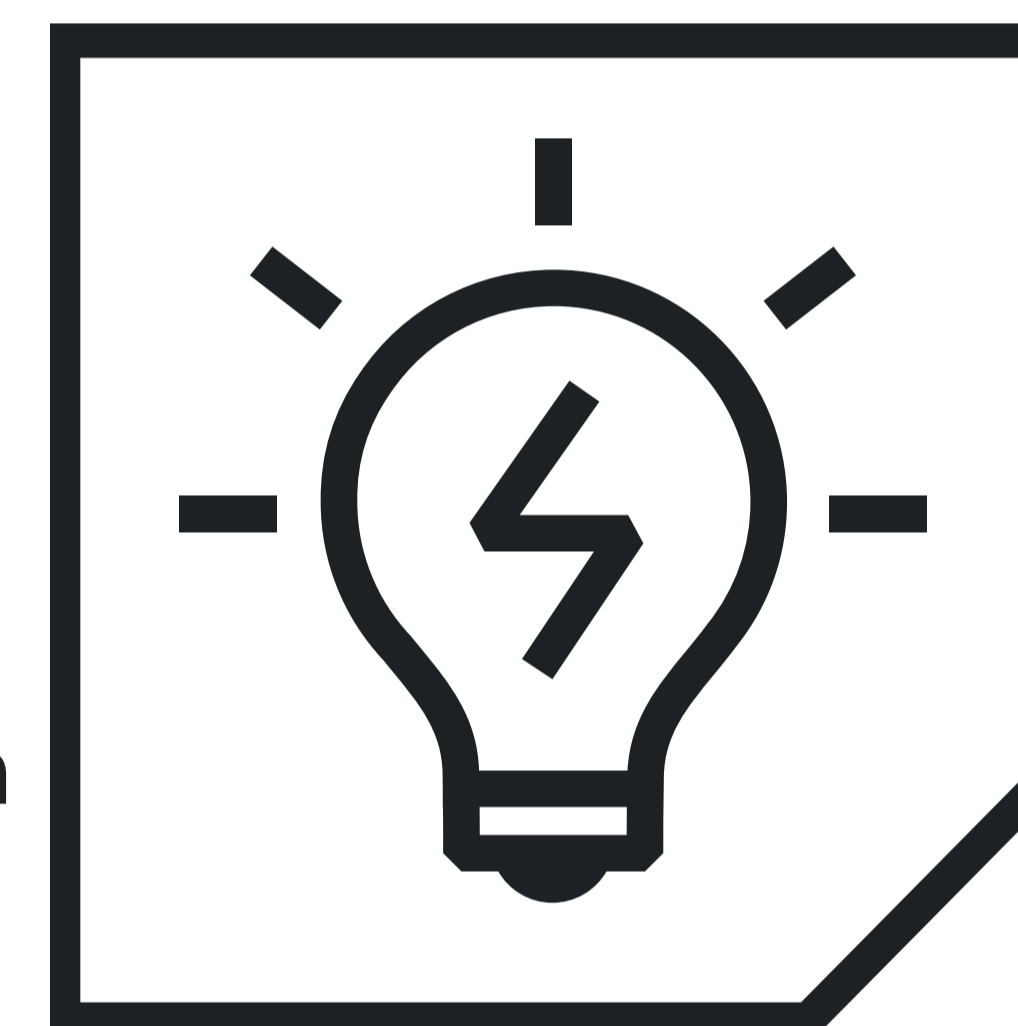


How did we embed the COIL into the 2nd year module on “Exploring Culture”?

- **Component 1:** Oral presentation of an ethnographically informed research project (self-selected groups of three; in-person presentation) - 40%
- **Component 2A:** COIL project - 10%
- **Component 2B:** Reflective essay (individual, based on Gibbs Reflective Cycle, drawing from reflective diary) - 50%

How do the COIL project and the reflective essay align with transformative and experiential learning?

- Academic reflection can be transformative when the **pedagogical process** is one of **knowledge transformation rather than knowledge transmission** (Carrington & Selva, 2010).
- However, students need to be **explicitly taught key structural elements** and **linguistic realisations** in order to **reflect critically** and to reconstruct their thinking (Carrington & Selva, 2010, Ryan, 2011).
- **Contextual factors** must be acknowledged (Ryan, 2011, p.101)



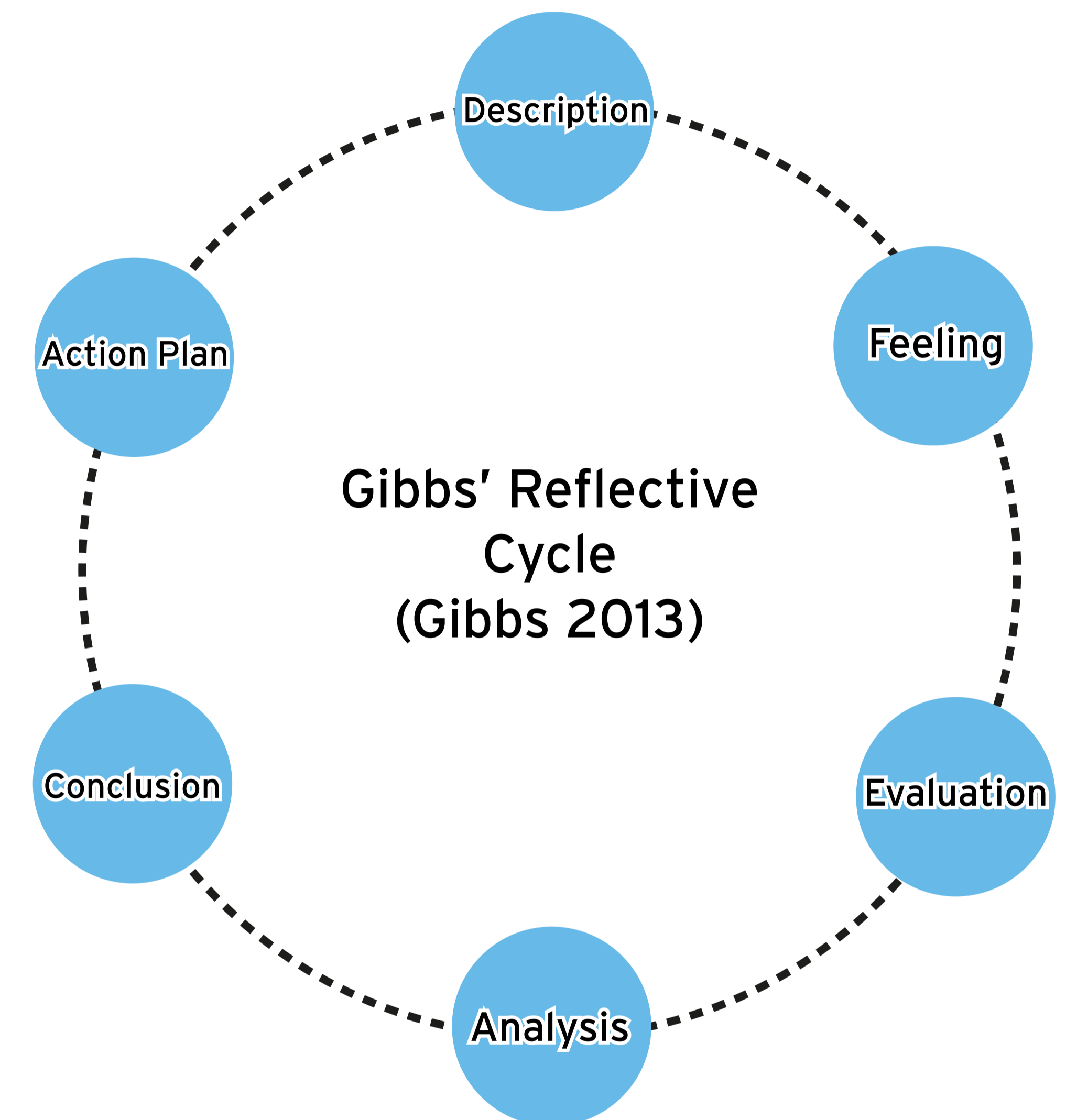
Benefits of COIL: Related Studies

- Enhanced intercultural competence (Kuzmenková & Koenraad, 2023; Du, Gamble, & Yuen (2024).
- Impact on student wellbeing / resilience (González, et. al, 2024)
- Teamwork skills with participants from other backgrounds--linguistic, cultural, educational, age, social class--(Spieler et.al, 2025)
- Effect on students' perceived employability (Hennings et. al, 2025)
- Development of digital skills and heightened awareness of business ethics (evidence from this study)

Why did we suggest students should follow Gibbs' reflective cycle? (Gibbs 2013)

- Learners are involved in an active exploration of experience
- They must **reflect** on their experience in a critical way
- They must be committed to the process of **exploring and learning**
- They must exercise some **independence** from the teacher
- The **teacher must devise the structure** of the learning activity
- Learners must be **open to experience and value their own experience**
- Experiential learning involves a **cyclical sequence of learning activities**

"The COIL project demonstrates Holliday's small culture theory as our teamwork was shaped more by the shared task than national differences (Holliday, 1999). Because of this our group formed a small working culture, gradually establishing norms for leadership and task distribution."
student feedback quotation



"Simply doing your part is not enough - you must also ensure that your presence is visible and your efforts are understood. The project taught me how important it is to clarify expectations early and to check in frequently, even when you feel overwhelmed" student feedback quotation

What were the completion rates of the module assessments?

- In-person group work (47/47), but we suspected that a lot of this was ChatGPT;
- COIL project (42/47), Two students were “kicked out” of their COIL group and produced a video together (2/47), Two students had extenuating circumstances and produced an individual video (2/47);
- Reflective essay (46/47 with 3/47 below 40%); most of these seemed very “genuine”.

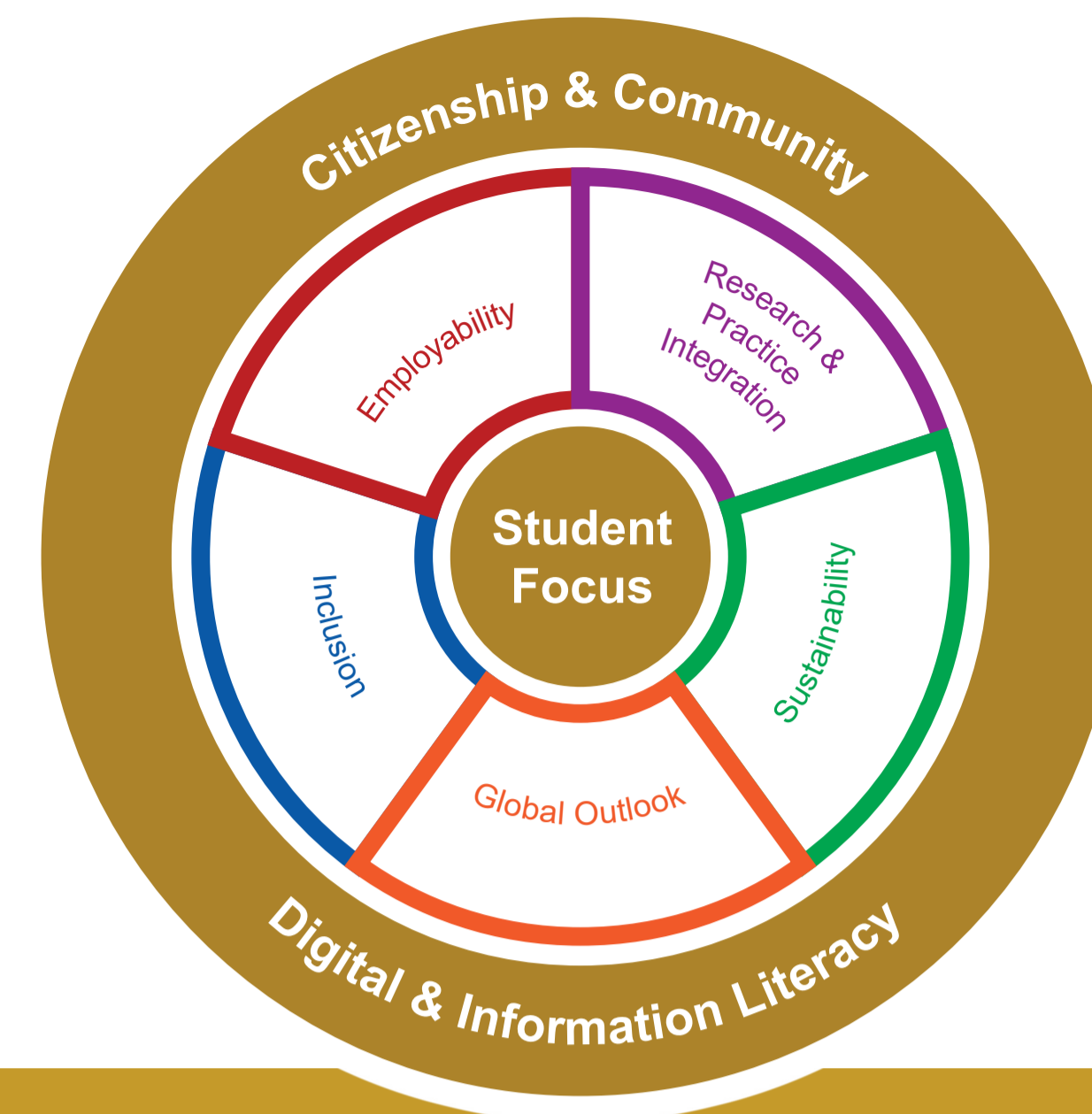
“A significant obstacle was coordinating across multiple time zones and accommodating different academic calendars. Academically, I have developed stronger organisational abilities, clearer communication of ideas, and enhanced capability to work effectively under pressure and meet deadlines. These competencies are critical not only for university assignments but also for collaborative projects in the increasingly globalised workplace.” student feedback quotation

To what extent were some of our pedagogical aims met?

Enhanced intercultural competence		Evidenced in some of the reflective diaries – students were more critical about “large culture” distinctions, and demonstrated increased self-awareness
Development of digital skills		Evidenced through successful online collaboration and production of joint videos
Heightened ethical awareness in business education		Evidenced in some of the videos
Impact on student wellbeing/resilience		Students demonstrated flexible solutions
Teamwork with participants from other backgrounds (linguistic, cultural, educational, age, social class)		Evidenced throughout, students mostly overcame initial worries

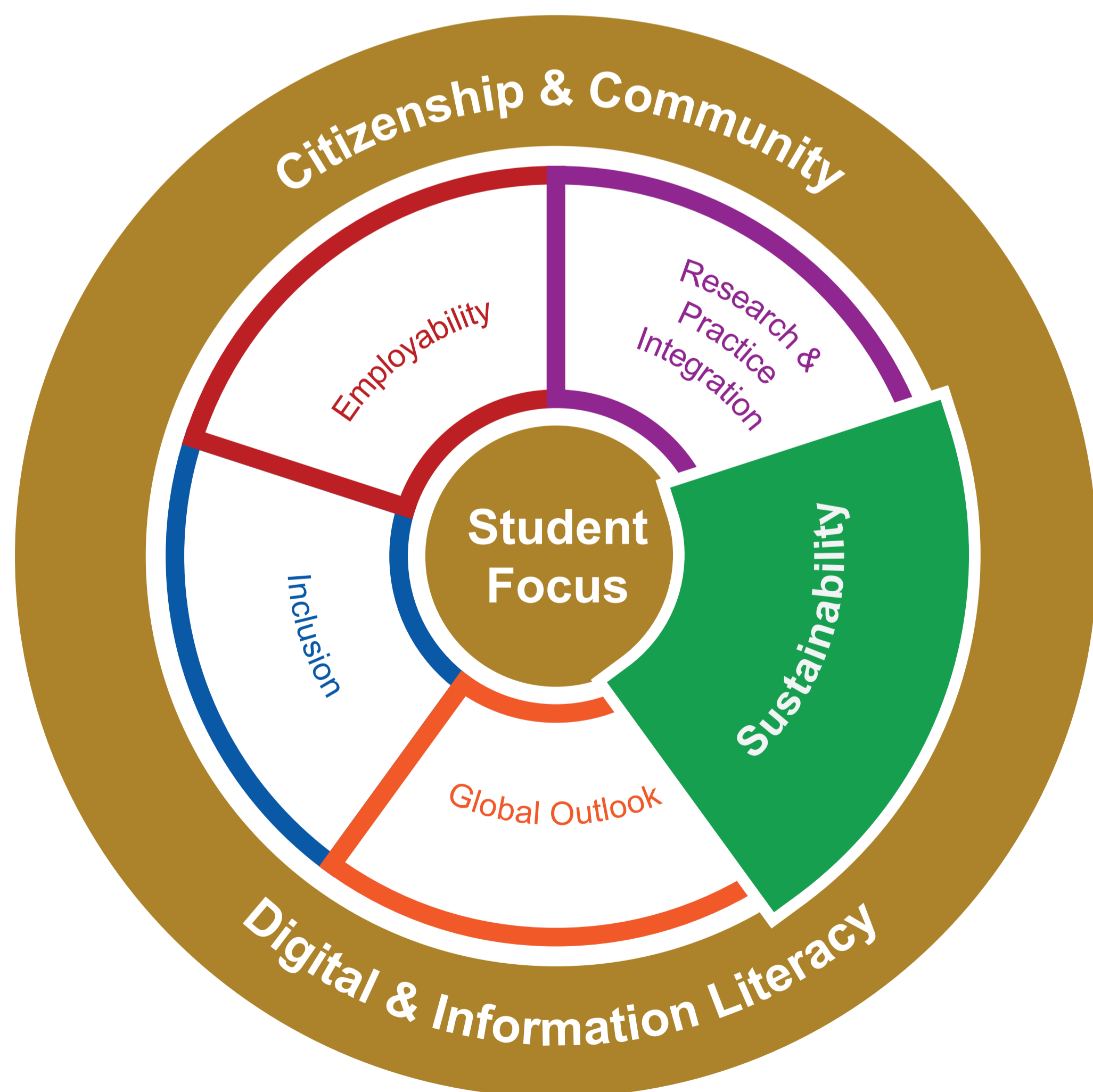
How did the COIL project align with the ENhance Framework?

An educational model that **connects students and faculty from different countries (Global Outlook)** for collaborative learning and **intercultural exchange (Citizenship & Community)** through **online platforms (Digital & Information Literacy)**. It promotes virtual mobility by enabling participants to engage in **meaningful cross-cultural dialogue without the need for physical travel (sustainability)** (O'Dowd, 2018; Rubin & Guth, 2015)



"One of the most important lessons I have taken away from this experience is that ethical and cultural norms aren't always shared and not understood the same way. Recognising this has helped me become more patient and supportive when misunderstanding arose." student feedback quotation

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



How does COIL Align with SDGs?

- aligned with **SDG 4** (Quality Education) by creating equitable access to global learning experiences.
- fosters intercultural dialogue (**SDG 16, Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions**),
- reduces educational and geographic disparities (**SDG 10, Reduce Inequalities**),
- builds sustainable institutional partnerships (**SDG 17, Partnerships for the Goals**)



What will we change for the next iteration?

- More details on COIL project in module descriptor
- Better preparation of students for COIL from the start of the module
- Move assessment 1 forward to give students more time to familiarise themselves with the idea of the COIL
- Make reflexivity more integral to entire module, for instance by encouraging short reflections on their learning in tutorials
- Clearer expectation setting in terms of communication with international groups, attendance at group meetings, timekeeping
- Continue to be aware of particular challenges for some students and offer alternative assessments where these cannot be overcome

"This was one of the moments where we perceived differences in work ethic or understanding of academic standards required sensitive discussion to maintain a collaborative spirit." student feedback quotation

"Because the communication was limited to the task, there was no space for social bonding or informal sharing. Though both groups went well, the local group was more intimate, whereas the international group was more structured but emotionally detached." student feedback quotation

Further Reading:

- Carrington, S., & Selva, G. (2010). Critical social theory and transformative learning: evidence in pre-service teachers' service-learning reflection logs. Higher Education Research and Development, 29(1), 45-57. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360903421384>
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