

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) as a tool for developing ethnorelativism

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Keywords

intercultural education, diversity in academia

Article History

Received 7 May 2026

Received in revised form 16 June 2025

Accepted 26 June 2025

Available online 18 March 2026

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*Essays advance a new idea, summarize a development, or initiate or engage in discussion. They may be narrower in scope than the above categories, but the subject matter should be of general scholarly interest.

Abstract

As diversity, equity and inclusion practices continue to be adopted by post-secondary institutions, an increase in intercultural understanding becomes essential. This paper highlights the importance of facilitating critical, international discourse to promote the shift from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism in academia in alignment with such practices. Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) is presented as an accessible and low-barrier tool for reducing cultural bias in academia using Milton Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) to measure success. Recommendations include implementing COIL with specific attention to manifestations of colonialism in participating countries, and consistent monitoring of the success of efforts to increase ethnorelativism in participants through the use of qualitative and quantitative research methods.

Introduction

This essay argues for COIL as a practical, low-barrier method of promoting intercultural competence among post-secondary learners. In accordance with Milton Bennett's DMIS, COIL presents an opportunity for participants to move from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism in a collaborative, supportive environment.

Since the early 2000s, the State University of New York (SUNY) has been the driving force behind the development of COIL (SUNY, 2020). As leaders in COIL, SUNY's framework states that the program can be between any two institutions, emphasizing that some of the best collaborations come from interdisciplinary partnerships. Team building, topic exchange/discussion, knowledge application, creation of a final project, and presentation of the project are the key aspects of the program. These collaborations can last anywhere from 5 to 14 weeks. See [Figure 1](#).

The COIL program consists of partner institutions organizing students and experts to discuss various topics and create a project reflecting important subjects covered during the learning experience. It presents a notable opportunity for participants to practice intercultural cross-collaboration, develop important insights their

Progression of a COIL module

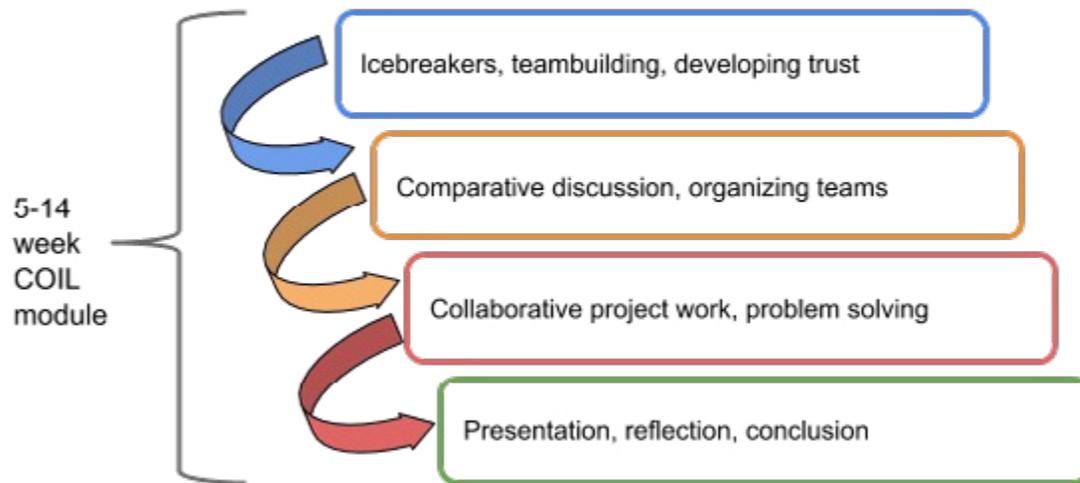


Figure 1. Progression of a COIL module.

Note: Progression of a COIL module. Reprinted from *What is COIL*, State University of New York, <https://coil.suny.edu/what-is-coil/>. Copyright 2025 State University of New York.

respective academic fields, and learn about diverse topics from experts and peers they otherwise may not have had the chance to interact with. As a student in COIL, there are ample opportunities to create long-term academic partnerships between students and staff internationally, in addition to personal friendships that can develop intercultural thought and belief outside of academia. The environment allows students to interact in a more informal manner through the use of icebreakers and teambuilding, facilitating genuine interest in content and autonomy in the associated projects. For example, this paper is the result of a COIL experience between Criminal Justice students and faculty at Humber Polytechnic in Toronto, Canada, and Psychology and Criminology students and faculty at Nottingham Trent University in the United Kingdom. This specific experience took place over the course of several weeks in which a topic was given for the week (restorative justice, community policing, etc.) and an expert from both countries would speak on the topic, followed by a question and discussion period between participants. The students taking part were split into two groups, which would meet regularly to further discuss questions, insights, or ideas related to course content. These groups reflected the demographics of the participating institutions, as they were composed of students from both Canada and the United Kingdom to further facilitate cross-collaboration. Each group chose a specific course topic to reflect on in the form of a project presented during the final week of the program.

As a student in COIL, I was able to interact with peers from the United Kingdom and expand beyond the “Humber bubble.” A topic we discussed frequently as a group was drug policy, highlighting the similarities and differences in terms of government regulations and in student perceptions of drug cultures. Although it would have been preferable to meet and learn together in person, the ability to collaborate over a video call still made the experience more profound and personal than solely written communication. This level of interconnection allowed us to identify commonalities and areas growth to help address the issues we find important as students.

COIL as a tool to develop ethnorelativism

Implementing COIL with a focus on increasing ethnorelativism can lay a solid foundation for efforts to diversify the discipline. Research on the effectiveness of intercultural teams shows that they can be either more or less effective than teams that consist of one culture (Nancy Allen, 2001, as cited in Bennett, 2016). Given this “either/or” finding, it is important that institutions focus on implementing diversity policies effectively. Bennett (2016) states that the key to valuing diversity in workplace and team environments is strong leadership. COIL allows for current academic leaders to educate themselves and their students on intercultural literacy, communication, and leadership to ensure the next generation of academics have adequate skills to solve

intercultural conflicts with empathy and respect. The ability to be conscious and considerate of various cultural identities and to treat these differences as an asset is key to intercultural collaboration (Bennett, 2016).

One of the first studies to measure the success of increasing intercultural competence in COIL participants found strong evidence that the program was highly effective in increasing intercultural intelligence (Hackett et al., 2023). This finding was extrapolated from quantitative data in the form of Likert scale pre- and post-surveys, in addition to qualitative data in the form of participant reflections. While the experimental group of this study, based in the United States, showed a significant increase in intercultural competence compared to the control group from the Netherlands. Hackett et al. suggest this is tied to the Netherlands group being predisposed to factors in their education that focused on intercultural competency. This finding supports the need to implement COIL programs in countries with low rates of ethnorelativism in their existing educational curricula.

DMIS as a measure of success

Initially developed for the purpose of intercultural training programs, the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) exists as a tool to empirically measure how well one can “coordinate meaning across cultural contexts” (Bennett, 2017, para. 3). This framework is based on constructivist epistemology that accepts that individual experiences shape knowledge, further supporting the notion that cultural differences influence academia (Bennett, 2017). DMIS is comprised of six stages (see Figure 2) ranging from the most ethnocentric to the most ethnorelative: Denial, Defense, Minimization, Acceptance, Adaptation, and Integration (Bennett, 2016; Bennett, 2017; Abbott, 2020). Using the DMIS framework positions prejudice and bias as a default condition and stresses that the human instinct is not necessarily to disrespect cultural differences, but rather to ignore the differentiation altogether (Abbott, 2020).

Conclusion

COIL creates a space for students and faculty in academia to participate in critical intercultural discussion. Consequently,

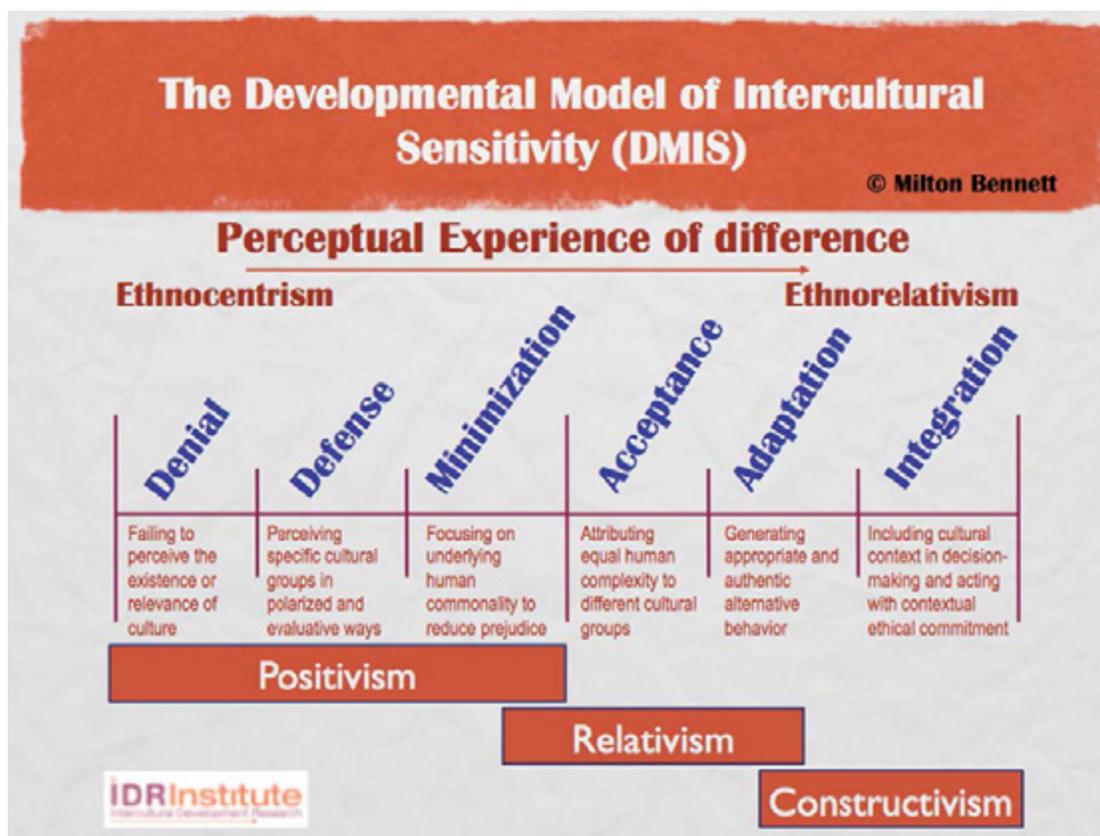


Figure 2. Paradigms of Intercultural Sensitivity.

Note: Paradigms of Intercultural Sensitivity. Reprinted from *The value of cultural diversity: rhetoric and reality*, Milton J. Bennett, Ph.D. <https://www.idrinstitute.org/resources/value-cultural-diversity-rhetoric-reality-2/>.

COIL has immense potential as a tool to increase intercultural sensitivity so as to depolarize and diversify academic narratives. As the world continues to fester with divisive political agendas, reinforcing the value of diversity is necessary for academic leaders to develop fluent intercultural communication. Milton Bennett's DMIS model provides an outline to empirically measure changes in intercultural sensitivity to support this concept. To implement COIL with a focus on increasing ethno relativism, specific attention must be paid to the topics of decolonization, anti-racism, and other forms of discrimination.

Positionality statement

Discussion section should elaborate on the significance of the study findings while comparing the results with other studies in the field. The limitations of the study that influenced the results can be discussed here. Any implication of the study's findings is to be supported by relevant evidence. Authors can describe if and/or how the findings influence further research in the field. A summary of the findings should be included along with further research questions that might have been generated. All findings addressed in the Discussion section should also be included in the Results section.

Note on Contributor

Sarah Dickey is a student at Humber Polytechnic. Having obtained an Honours Bachelor of Social Science in Criminal Justice, she is now studying to be a research analyst and intends to pursue work in harm reduction and peace and conflict studies.

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