



The Contribution of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) to Career-Relevant Learning



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Executive Summary

This report draws on two interconnected studies examining the contribution of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) to career-relevant learning, intercultural competence, and global professional readiness within higher education.

The first and larger study was conducted within the iKudu project, co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union¹, involving 10 universities across South Africa and Europe. Between 2019 and 2024, more than 3,000 students participated in 65 COIL exchanges across multiple disciplinary and institutional contexts. The iKudu project explored how COIL could contribute to internationalised and decolonised curriculum practices through digitally mediated collaboration and knowledge pluralisation within the broader context of curriculum transformation and comprehensive internationalisation.

The second and smaller follow-on study, COILing Careers through iKudu, extended this work by examining how participation in COIL contributed to students' transversal skill development for employability, further study, and active citizenship. In this context, 'Careers' refers to employment and /or study opportunities undertaken during a person's life and with opportunities for progress. Transversal skills refer to capabilities applicable across diverse professional and social contexts, including communication, collaboration, organisation, adaptability, and reflexivity.

The study adopted a two-stage multi-method design. Stage 1 analysed open-ended survey responses from 93 students who participated in iKudu COIL exchanges across partner institutions. Stage 2 utilised Story Circles methodology to deepen and contextualise these findings through participant-led narrative reflection. The analysis examined not only how students experienced COIL across different institutional and disciplinary settings, but also how learning developed through interaction, collaboration, reflection, and engagement across difference.

The findings indicate that COIL contributes not only to intercultural awareness, but also to communication, coordination, reflexivity, ethical collaboration, language development, and forms of professional readiness associated with globally networked and digitally mediated work environments. At the same time, the study demonstrates that these outcomes vary across contexts and disciplines and are shaped by factors such as task design, modes of collaboration, facilitation, and opportunities for participation. The report contributes to current debates by examining the mechanisms through which COIL learning develops whilst positioning COIL not only as an internationalisation activity, but also as a site of career-relevant and reflective global learning.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background and rationale

This report presents findings from the iKudu and COILing Careers through iKudu studies, which explored how Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL)² exchange can support students' intercultural development, ethical awareness, and preparation for future study and work. COIL has increasingly been positioned as a form of internationalisation that enables students to engage across geographical, institutional, cultural, and disciplinary boundaries without requiring physical mobility (Haug & Jacobs, 2023; Orsini-Jones et al., 2025). However, while COIL is often associated with intercultural learning in broad terms, there remains a need to understand more precisely what students learn, the mechanisms by which such learning develops, and how these experiences relate to career development and professional readiness.

This report addresses that need by bringing together two sets of evidence. The project began with a survey-based analysis of student experiences across institutions and disciplines (Jacobs et al., 2024) and was subsequently extended through Story Circles methodology (Deardorff, 2019; Parks, 2023), which enabled students to narrate, reflect on, and reinterpret their experiences in their own terms. This mixed-methods approach allows the report to move beyond descriptive claims about international exposure and toward a more grounded understanding of how COIL contributes to career-relevant competencies and reflective global learning.

1.2 Report aim

The report examines how students experienced COIL exchange and what forms of learning emerged across contexts through participation in iKudu (<https://www.ufs.ac.za/ikudu>) and the subsequent COILing Careers study, with particular focus on employability, intercultural competence, ethics, and professional development (OECD, 2020).

1.3 Research questions

In order to achieve the aim of the study, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1: What kinds of learning do students report through COIL exchange across different institutional and disciplinary contexts?

RQ2: How do these learning experiences relate to career preparation, intercultural competence, and professional practice?

RQ3: How do students describe the processes through which this learning takes place?

RQ4: How do these patterns converge and diverge across contexts?

1.4 Structure of the report

This report first outlines the conceptual background and project framing (cf. 2), followed by the multi-methods design (cf. 3). Findings from the survey are presented (cf. 4), followed by Story Circle findings organised thematically (cf. 5). A cross-case synthesis identifies convergences, divergences, and mechanisms of learning across contexts (cf. 5 Table 4). The discussion (cf. 6) connects these findings to relevant literature and highlights the report's contribution to current thinking on COIL, employability, and global competence. The report concludes (cf. 7) with implications and recommendations for future COIL design and research.

²Also referred to as Virtual Exchange, or COIL-VE. The detail is explained in Section 2.

³Students and / or graduates who took part in iKudu COIL exchanges were invited to be part of the 'COILing Careers' impact project. Wider students involved in 'COILing Careers' also experienced COIL either in the build-up to or the aftermath of the iKudu project or because iKudu prompted / built on the integration of COILs across the partner HEIs.



2. Conceptual and Literature Background

2.1 COIL exchange and internationalisation

COIL has gained increasing significance within higher education as institutions seek more inclusive and accessible approaches to internationalisation. Traditional models of internationalisation have historically depended heavily on physical mobility opportunities available only to a minority of students, often constrained by financial, geographic, structural, or socio-political factors (Beelen, 2026; Howard et al., 2023; Jacobs et al., 2021). In contrast, COIL is frequently positioned within Internationalisation at Home (IaH), where international and intercultural learning is integrated into the curriculum within domestic learning environments and made accessible to a broader and more diverse student population (Beelen, 2026; Beelen & Jones, 2015).

Beyond widening access, COIL is increasingly recognised as a pedagogical space that supports intercultural dialogue, reflexive engagement, and collaborative knowledge construction across contexts (Haug & Jacobs, 2023; Wimpenny et al., 2024). In particular, Third Space conceptualisations of COIL emphasise its potential to create relational and transformative learning environments in which students engage critically with different perspectives, assumptions, and ways of knowing (Orsini-Jones et al., 2025; Wimpenny et al., 2022).

Importantly, COIL is not confined to particular disciplines or institutional types. Research demonstrates its application across fields including intercultural communication, leadership, sustainability, teacher education, and business studies (Bulnes & de Louw, 2024; Howard et al., 2023). Through such collaboration, students engage not only with disciplinary content, but also with intercultural communication, teamwork, reflexivity, and problem-solving across difference

(Beelen, 2023; Howard et al., 2023). This is often claimed to be linked with employability and the world of work.

2.2 COIL and career-relevant learning

Debates on graduate employability increasingly emphasise that professional readiness involves more than disciplinary knowledge or technical competence alone. Contemporary work environments require graduates to collaborate across cultural and linguistic differences, communicate effectively in diverse teams, navigate uncertainty, and respond reflexively and ethically to complex situations. Employability is therefore increasingly associated with transversal capabilities such as communication, teamwork, adaptability, problem-solving, intercultural competence, and reflective self-awareness (McCowan, 2014; Mbwambo & Salanga, 2023).

Within higher education, COIL has been put forward increasingly as a pedagogical space through which such capabilities may be developed. COIL is frequently discussed in relation to intercultural learning and internationalisation, with many of the practices embedded within COIL mirroring the demands of contemporary professional work. Students are required to collaborate across time zones, negotiate different communication styles and work expectations, coordinate tasks digitally, manage ambiguity, and engage constructively with unfamiliar perspectives (Haug & Jacobs, 2023; Wimpenny et al., 2024). COIL contributes not only to intercultural awareness in a generic sense, but also to the development of communication, coordination, reflexivity, and ethical judgement increasingly associated with contemporary professional practice and global citizenship competence (Wimpenny et al., 2024).

Rather than positioning employability narrowly in relation to labour market outcomes alone, this study adopts a broader understanding of professional readiness that includes adaptive, relational, and ethically grounded forms of engagement. The study therefore examines how students experience and interpret the communicative, collaborative, and reflexive dimensions of COIL participation, and how these relate to career-relevant learning within digitally mediated and internationally networked environments.

2.3 OECD Learning Compass and K-S-A-V framework

To interpret the forms of learning emerging through COIL participation, this study draws on the OECD Learning Compass 2030 and its associated Knowledge–Skills–Attitudes and Values (K-S-A-V) framework. The Learning Compass conceptualises learning as a transformative and future-oriented process in which students develop the capacity to navigate complexity, uncertainty, diversity, and societal change through the integrated development of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values (OECD, 2019).

Within the OECD framework, knowledge includes disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and contextual understanding; skills include communication, collaboration, adaptability, problem-solving, and critical thinking; while attitudes and values include openness, empathy, responsibility, ethical engagement, and respect for others (OECD, 2019). These dimensions align closely with the forms of learning frequently associated with COIL environments, where students are required to collaborate across cultural, linguistic, disciplinary, and technological differences.

The study also draws on the OECD Anticipation–Action–Reflection cycle as a useful lens for understanding how learning develops through interaction and experience.

Within this framing, students anticipate challenges and alternative perspectives, act through collaboration and problem-solving, and reflect on both the process and implications of their experiences. In COIL contexts, learning develops through iterative processes of negotiation, adaptation, reflexivity, and engagement across contexts.

The OECD framework is therefore useful not only for identifying what students report about their learning through COIL, but also for examining how communication, coordination, reflexivity, and ethical judgement develop through digitally mediated intercultural collaboration.

2.4 Internationalisation at Home, Third Space, and reflective global learning

COIL is widely positioned within Internationalisation at Home (IaH), where international and intercultural learning are integrated into the curriculum and made accessible to all students rather than only those who participate in physical mobility programmes (Beelen, 2023; Beelen et al., 2021; Beelen & Jones, 2015). Within this framing, internationalisation is understood not simply as geographic movement, but as the intentional development of intercultural, global, and reflexive learning through the curriculum and broader student experience. COIL therefore provides a practical pedagogical approach through which internationally networked learning can occur within digitally mediated domestic learning environments.

IaH and Internationalisation of the Curriculum both developed in the nineties of the 20th century, as a reaction to the relatively low percentages of students studying abroad (Beelen, 2026; Jacobs, et al., 2021). Internationalisation at Home was initially focused on providing alternative international activities for non-mobile students. Beelen and Jones (2015) redefined IaH to stress the purposefulness of the learning process and the building of competences rather than just activities.

COIL has become an increasingly prominent instrument within an internationalised curriculum, sometimes even considered equivalent to it (Soulé et al., 2025; Beelen, 2026). This tendency has, for instance, been observed in the United Kingdom, particularly during the COVID pandemic as Beelen (2023) noted.

Emerging COIL scholarship further conceptualises these environments as forms of Third Space learning in which students engage across cultural, linguistic, disciplinary, and epistemological differences through collaborative online interaction (Orsini-Jones et al., 2025; Wimpenny et al., 2022). Drawing on Bhabha's notion of Third Space (Bhabha & Rutherford, 2006), such learning environments are understood as relational and liminal spaces in which assumptions, identities, and ways of knowing may be questioned, negotiated, and reconfigured through engagement with others. In COIL Third Space contexts, learning develops through interaction, negotiation, discomfort, and collaborative meaning-making across contexts.

Reflection and student agency are central within these processes. Research on COIL and global learning increasingly emphasises that transformative learning depends on opportunities for students to reflect critically on their own assumptions, positionalities, and experiences in relation to others (Haug & Jacobs, 2023; Wimpenny et al., 2024; Orsini-Jones et al., 2025;). Rather than positioning students as passive recipients of intercultural knowledge, COIL requires active participation, collaboration, negotiation, and reflexive engagement within complex and sometimes uncomfortable learning environments (Haug & Jacobs, 2023; Howard et al., 2023). From this perspective, reflective global learning is not understood as the acquisition of fixed intercultural competencies, but as an ongoing process of relational, critical, and contextually situated learning across difference (Orsini-Jones et al., 2025).

2.5 Gap and contribution

While existing COIL scholarship has contributed significantly to understandings of intercultural learning, exchange, and curriculum internationalisation (e.g., Howard et al., 2023; Wimpenny et al., 2022), less attention has been given to how COIL contributes to career-relevant learning and professional readiness within digitally mediated and globally networked environments. Much of the literature emphasises intercultural competence broadly, with comparatively limited focus on how communication, coordination, reflexivity, collaboration, and ethical judgement develop through COIL participation in ways that resemble contemporary professional practice.

This study contributes to the literature by examining COIL through a career-relevant learning lens, drawing on the OECD Learning Compass and K-S-A-V framework to interpret how students develop knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values associated with global competence and professional engagement (OECD, 2019).

Importantly, the study examines both convergence and divergence across contexts, recognising that students do not experience COIL uniformly. Rather than presenting intercultural learning as linear or universally transformative, the study explores how learning emerges differently across cultural, linguistic, institutional, and relational settings. In doing so, the analysis focuses not only on identifying learning outcomes, but also on examining the mechanisms through which learning develops, including interaction, negotiation, discomfort, adaptation, reflection, and collaborative problem-solving.

Finally, the study highlights the value of Story Circles as both a methodological and pedagogical tool within COIL research and practice (Deardorff, 2019). Story Circles provide space for reflexive engagement, perspective-sharing, and relational meaning-making, enabling richer insight into how students interpret and narrate their learning experiences across difference.



3. Methodology

3.1 Overall research design

This study used a two-stage mixed-methods design to explore students' experiences with COIL and how those experiences related to intercultural learning, ethical development, and career-relevant competence. The first stage analysed survey responses in order to identify broad patterns across institutions and disciplines. The second stage used Story Circles to deepen, contextualise, and in some cases complicate those survey findings by inviting participants to narrate and reflect on their experiences in their own words.

The combination of these two stages was important for the overall project design. The survey phase made it possible to identify recurring topics across a larger sample, including communication, intercultural competence, ethics, and sustainability. However, the survey data could only partially explain how these forms of learning were experienced and how they were produced in practice. The Story Circle phase, therefore, provided a more participant-led, reflective, and contextualised account of COIL learning.

3.2 Stage 1: Survey analysis

The first phase of the study drew on a dataset of student survey responses collected during the first part of the COIL-focused iKudu project. Of the total survey entries recorded by the software, 93 were complete and valid responses and were therefore included in the survey analysis. The other 63 entries were excluded because they did not meet the criteria for usable responses (either incomplete responses, or the result of accidental clicks/opened survey links that the software automatically counted as responses).

This rendered a reliable and complete final dataset, appropriate for analysis (see figure 1). Universities who were part of the first phase of the iKudu project rendered responses to the survey (see figure 1), spanning multiple discipline clusters (see figure 2).

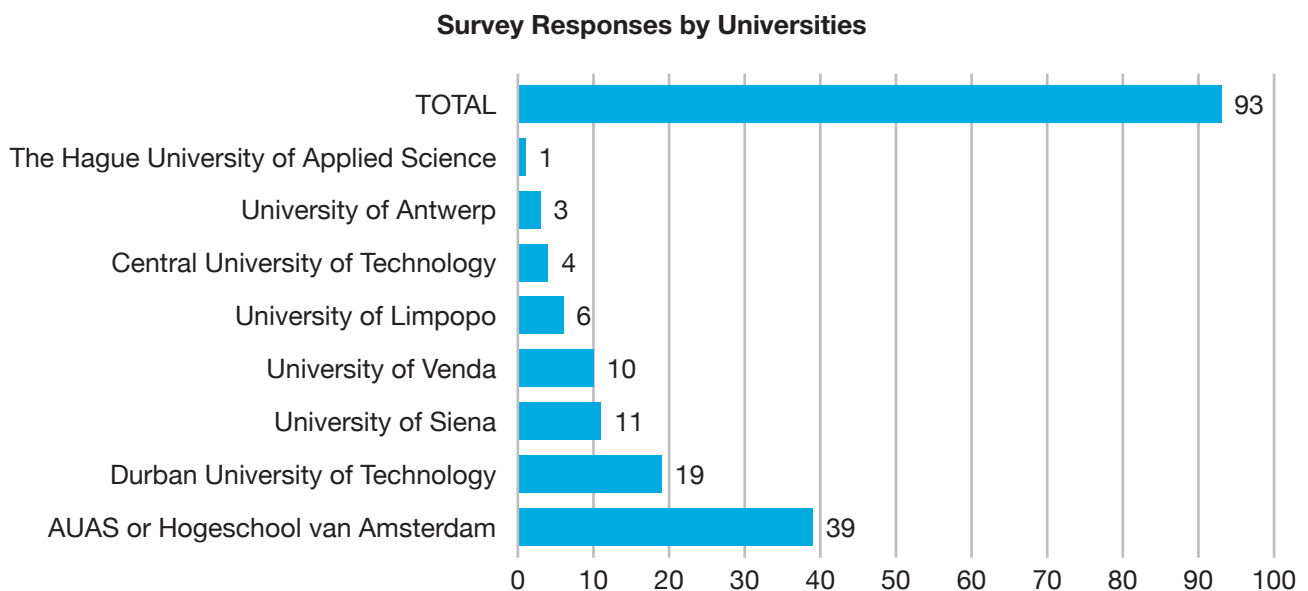


Figure 1: Final responses by universities

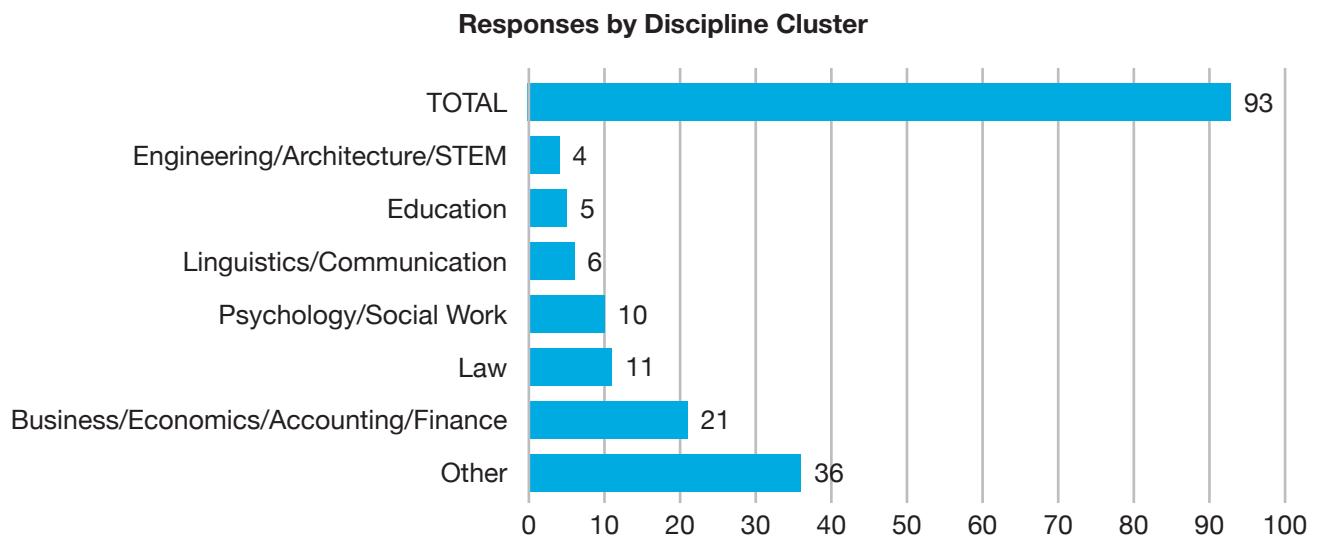


Figure 2: Responses by discipline cluster

The survey comprised seven questions, each addressing a different dimension of the COIL experience. Question 1 asked students to identify aspects of the course that were new to their studies, while Question 2 explored whether they had previously engaged with the international dimensions of their field in other modules. Question 3 invited students to reflect on employability skills they had developed or strengthened through the COIL experience. Question 4 examined how collaboration with students abroad had influenced students' views of their future professional careers, and Question 5 focused on how COIL contributed to intercultural competence in comparison with intercultural experiences at home. Questions 6 and 7 combined a Likert-scale frequency measure with an open-ended explanatory prompt and focused respectively on engagement with the Sustainable Development Goals and with the ethical dimensions of students' fields and professions.

Open-ended responses were analysed in relation to key themes relevant to the overall project, including intercultural learning, communication, employability, sustainability, and ethics.

The dataset was analysed using the Framework Method, which enabled structured deductive coding against pre-established thematic categories while remaining open to emergent patterns within the data (Gale et al., 2013). The survey analysis provided the initial empirical map for the study and helped identify both common patterns and areas of unevenness across institutions and disciplines.

Although the original survey instrument was developed for broader iKudu project evaluation purposes, the present study re-analysed selected survey items (Q1, Q4, Q5, Q6, and Q7) through the lens of employability, intercultural competence, ethics, and career-relevant learning. Responses to Question 3, which focused explicitly on employability skills, were integrated into the thematic synthesis where analytically relevant. In this way, the study reinterpreted the survey data through a different analytical framing, organising the analysis around the selected survey questions, a cross-disciplinary synthesis, and a discussion of how the findings align with the OECD Knowledge–Skills–Attitudes–Values (K-S-A-V) framework and broader understandings of employability (see Section 4 for further detail).

The survey phase was not intended to function as a stand-alone analysis, but rather as an exploratory stage that informed the subsequent qualitative follow-up.

Patterns that proved most analytically generative, particularly around intercultural

competence, SDG engagement, professional ethics, and the conditions under which learning deepens, were carried forward into Phase 2 of the study, where they were explored through Story Circles (Deardorff, 2019).

It is important to acknowledge that open-ended survey responses carry inherent expressive constraints. Students must articulate complex, ambivalent, or only partially formed experiences within the space of a few sentences, without the benefit of sustained dialogic exchange that might support them in finding words for what they have been through (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is reasonable to assume that some experiences, particularly those involving discomfort, relational difficulty, or gradual and hard-to-name learning, were not fully expressible in this format. This is one of the central methodological rationales for Phase 2: the Story Circle sessions were designed precisely to create conditions in which participants could narrate, interpret, and collectively reflect on their COIL experiences in ways that written survey responses alone cannot support.

3.3 Stage 2: Story Circles

The second phase of the study used Story Circles as its primary qualitative method. Story Circles are a structured narrative method developed within UNESCO-led work on intercultural competence, designed to cultivate storytelling, deep listening, reflection, and mutual understanding across cultural differences (Deardorff, 2019). Unlike conventional interview formats, the method does not position participants as respondents to a fixed schedule of questions; instead, it invites them to share and interpret personal experiences in dialogue with others, treating that dialogic process as generative of meaning in its own right (Bochner

& Riggs, 2014; Lindsay & Schwind, 2016; Parks 2023). This resonates with the broader tradition of narrative inquiry, in which lived experience is understood as both the subject and the substance of the research (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Ford, 2020).

This approach was particularly appropriate for the present study for three reasons. First, it enabled participants to move beyond the necessarily compressed responses of Phase 1 and to explain, in their own words and at their own pace, how they had actually experienced COIL in practice, what had surprised or frustrated them, and what had shifted their understanding. Second, Story Circles support reflexive and relational forms of data generation, making it possible to explore not only what students learned but also how they interpreted those experiences over time and in relation to others' accounts. A participant's articulation of an experience frequently prompted recognition, elaboration, or gentle challenge from others in the group, producing a form of collective sense-making that individual interview data could not easily replicate. Third, because the project was concerned with intercultural and career-relevant learning, Story Circles served a dual function: they were not only a means of data collection but also a space in which participants could articulate and rehearse precisely the forms of reflection, perspective-taking, and self-awareness that the project sought to understand. In this sense, the method contributed to the reflexive process being studied, and not only to its documentation.

Sessions followed a structured three-round protocol. In the first round, participants introduced themselves through a low-stakes opening prompt, such as naming their favourite holiday or festival, sharing the story behind their name, and offering three words or phrases that described their background and why those words mattered to them. In the second round, each participant shared a specific, memorable COIL-related experience in response to a storytelling prompt, speaking for up to three minutes without interruption.

A short flashback round followed, in which each listener recalled something memorable from another participant's story within 15 seconds. Sessions concluded with a facilitated whole-group debrief, structured around questions about what had shifted in participants' thinking and what they would carry forward into future study or professional life. All sessions were audio-recorded with informed consent and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

3.4 Story Circle sample and case selection

The wider Story Circle phase of the project involved multiple qualitative groups across partner contexts. In total, this phase comprised six Story Circle groups from The Hague University of Applied Sciences (THUAS), one story circle from Coventry University (CU), one from the University of the Free State (UFS), and one Transnational Story Circle. These groups were not all taken forward equally into the final written cross-case analysis. Instead, the report focuses on the cases selected and developed during the qualitative analytic phase of the project.

Of the six THUAS groups, three were included in the analysis: Group 2, Group 5, and Group 6⁴. The remaining THUAS groups (Groups 1, 3, and 4) were not taken forward into the final analytic stage by their respective leads and are therefore not included in the present cross-case findings⁵. In addition to these, the CU Story Circle and the UFS Story Circle as well as the Transnational Story Circle were included in the analysis. The Transnational Story Circle, however, occupied a distinct position within the project design. Rather than being anchored in a single institution, it brought together participants across contexts. It included two participants from CU who had also participated in the CU Story Circle, one participant each from UFS and THUAS who had not taken part in the initial institutional Story Circles.

The Transnational Story Circle, therefore, functioned as an additional comparative layer, offering an explicitly cross-context narrative space rather than duplicating a single institutional case.

3.5 Participant and case overview

The Story Circle cases vary in size, composition, and cultural structure, reflecting the project's multi-institutional and multi-disciplinary design. Some groups were institutionally anchored, drawing participants from a shared programme context; others were nationally homogeneous or explicitly transnational in composition. All participant names are pseudonymised; codes reflect assigned initials used consistently throughout the analysis. Rather than relying only on a demographic summary, the qualitative analysis is supported by case-level participant overview tables organised according to the OECD K-S-A-V framework (OECD, 2020). These tables summarise each participant's reported learning outcomes across the four dimensions and provide a consistent analytic overview across cases, supporting the cross-case synthesis (see the combined overview in Table 1).

⁴Group 6 represented Japanese students participating in a COIL within the Future of Work minor at THUAS

⁵Because six Story Circle groups originated from THUAS, retaining all groups would have disproportionately weighted the analysis toward a single institutional context. Three groups were therefore purposively selected to preserve institutional balance while retaining variation in student profile, prior COIL exposure, and programme context

Table 1: OECD K-S-A-V Learning Outcomes by Participant

Participant	Knowledge (Intercultural / Disciplinary / Self-knowledge)	Skills (Social-emotional / Cognitive / Practical-digital)	Attitudes & Values
CU			
DS (Business / Marketing)	■ Intercultural & contextual knowledge of US-UK-Dubai working styles and time zones ■ Market knowledge: identifying niche opportunities in the Dubai healthcare market ■ Self-knowledge: recognising limits of own perspective	■ Perspective-taking ■ Adaptability in communication styles ■ Creative problem-solving using multiple cultural viewpoints ■ Digital collaboration & time-zone coordination	■ Curiosity ■ Openness to learning ■ Respect for diversity
SM (Business / Marketing)	■ Knowledge of German and UK education cultures ■ Awareness of intercultural communication differences (even in English) ■ Self-knowledge: recognising inattentive listening and becoming more considerate	■ Active listening ■ Empathy ■ Reflective thinking / meta-cognition ■ Communication scaffolding (adapting explanation structure step-by-step)	■ Openness ■ Accountability ■ Care for others ■ Respect for diversity
VA (HRM & Leadership)	■ Knowledge of Nigerian vs UK communication norms ■ Professional knowledge related to HRM and leadership ■ Self-knowledge: shift from reserved to confident communicator	■ Active listening ■ Professional communication ■ Patience ■ Reflective self-development	■ Fairness ■ Equality ■ Accommodation ■ Respect for

Participant	Knowledge (Intercultural / Disciplinary / Self-knowledge)	Skills (Social-emotional / Cognitive / Practical-digital)	Attitudes & Values
MP (Business / Marketing)	■ Awareness of South African work processes and responsiveness norms ■ Self-knowledge: awareness of own learning needs (dyslexia)	■ Navigating collaboration breakdowns in teams ■ Persistence and adaptation through group changes ■ Developing understanding of differing work processes	■ Inclusion ■ Patience ■ Willingness to accommodate others ■ Desire for mutual understanding
MS (Biomedical / Lab-based work)	■ Knowledge of inclusive scientific teamwork ■ Awareness of intercultural norms across academic and civic contexts ■ Self-knowledge: recognising own communication and social style	■ Active listening ■ Perspective-taking ■ Reflective thinking ■ Organisational and concise professional communication	■ Inclusion ■ Accessibility and equity ■ Social responsibility ■ Commitment to safe and respectful
THUAS GROUP 2			
EV (Marketing)	■ Increasing understanding of other cultures	■ Adaptability ■ Communication ■ Developing team dynamics	■ Patience ■ Reflecting on one's own behaviour when working across cultures
KA (Marketing)	■ Understanding work ethics needed to achieve results in COILS	■ Organisational skills ■ Adaptability	■ Enhanced curiosity ■ Openness to difference
QU (HRM studies)	■ Understanding similarities and differences on work approach and ethic ■ Communication ■ Learning how to run COIL groups	■ Adaptability - utilising technology to communicate across time zones ■ Navigating cultural differences	■ Inclusivity to find the other culture and build bridges that drive productivity ■ Looking for opportunities to implement COIL lessons

Participant	Knowledge (Intercultural / Disciplinary / Self-knowledge)	Skills (Social-emotional / Cognitive / Practical-digital)	Attitudes & Values
FR (Real Estate studies)	■ Getting to know different cultures and dealing with language barriers.	■ Organisation skills ■ Intercultural Collaboration ■ Presentation	■ Developing positive team dynamic through patience and understanding.
TE (Facility Management studies)	■ Obtaining new skills - operating new software ■ Increased Cultural Awareness	■ Organisational skills	■ Focusing on bonding and engendering teamwork and patience.
THUAS GROUP 5			
CR (Facility Management / International Internship Experience)	■ Intercultural knowledge of differing time orientations (Dutch punctuality vs. flexible norms) ■ Contextual understanding of how task structures shape “international” collaboration ■ Self-knowledge regarding direct communication style and professional expectations	■ Adaptive coordination strategies (renegotiating time expectations, digital follow-up) ■ Direct and structured communication ■ Reflective evaluation of collaboration formats ■ Application of intercultural learning from internship to academic teamwork	■ Professional accountability ■ Valuing clarity and mutual commitment ■ Openness to relational grounding before task execution
IS (Facility Management / Internship Pathway)	■ Intercultural awareness beyond stereotypes (variation within and across national groups) ■ Contextual knowledge of grading and academic expectation differences ■ Self-knowledge regarding motivation and group alignment dynamics	■ Perspective-taking in evaluating collaboration quality ■ Integrative task synthesis after division of labour ■ Reflective judgement of preparedness for cultural differences ■ Emerging AI literacy and future-of-work awareness	■ Openness to difference ■ Valuing fairness and motivation alignment ■ Respect for diverse working styles

Participant	Knowledge (Intercultural / Disciplinary / Self-knowledge)	Skills (Social-emotional / Cognitive / Practical-digital)	Attitudes & Values
CE (Facility Management / Academic Progression)	■ Intercultural knowledge of cultural time norms ■ Awareness of language proficiency as a participation mediator ■ Self-knowledge of linguistic confidence and presentation anxiety	■ Second-language communication in authentic collaboration ■ Managing cognitive load in English-mediated tasks ■ Cooperative deadline alignment ■ AI prompt development and multimodal production skills	■ Vulnerability and growth orientation ■ Commitment to improvement ■ Respect for collaborative responsibility
MD (Facility Management / Migrant Academic Trajectory)	■ Comparative intercultural knowledge (Arabic and Mexican time flexibility) ■ Contextual awareness of cultural adaptation in the Dutch academic space ■ Self-knowledge regarding language development pathway	■ Intercultural adaptability ■ Informal language acquisition through immersion ■ Cross-cultural rapport building ■ Engagement with AI tools and future-of-work concepts	■ Cultural tolerance ■ Resilience ■ Openness to diversity and technological change
THUAS GROUP 6			
KY (International Communication Management)	■ Intercultural knowledge of classroom interaction norms (Dutch students expressing opinions, questioning, reasoning) contrasted with perceived Japanese norms ■ Contextual knowledge of time zone realities in Europe and Japan online collaboration ■ Self-knowledge: recognises limits of Japanese educational socialisation around having and voicing opinions	■ Perspective taking across educational cultures ■ Cognitive skill: reason giving and critical stance (having “opinion and reason”) ■ Practical digital coordination across time zones (asynchronous division of labour framed as productive 24-hour workflow) ■ Disciplinary adjacent: AI futures thinking and evaluative use of tools (beyond convenience use)	■ Values independent thinking and reasoned participation ■ Openness to intercultural learning ■ Learning orientation toward self-improvement ■ Pragmatic orientation to collaboration under constraints

Participant	Knowledge (Intercultural / Disciplinary / Self-knowledge)	Skills (Social-emotional / Cognitive / Practical-digital)	Attitudes & Values
AR (International Communication Management)	■ Intercultural knowledge of differing communication styles (Dutch directness and “strict asking” versus Japanese relational caution) ■ Contextual knowledge of online collaboration difficulties and chat-based communication limits ■ Self-knowledge: recognises own hesitation and quietness in group communication	■ Social-emotional skill: managing participation norms and discomfort in online teamwork ■ Agency-related skill: recognising and valuing direct requests as a coordination tool ■ Cognitive and creative skill: idea development from a single theme into a narrative and video output	■ Respect for collective participation ■ Openness to learning alternative communication styles ■ Emerging confidence and willingness to participate more in future ■ Consideration for others (relational caution)
AA (International Communication Management)	■ Intercultural knowledge of “reading the room” as a Japanese interactional norm, contrasted with the Dutch initiation style ■ Contextual knowledge of time zone and “24-hour chat” dynamic in asynchronous collaboration ■ Self-knowledge: identifies the need to express feelings and opinions more directly	■ Social-emotional skill: increased confidence in expression and reduced hesitation to initiate ■ Practical digital communication skill: using chat for collaboration across active hours ■ Language-related skill: vocabulary building and expression seeking for communication (searching for terms to text teammates)	■ Openness to growth and participation ■ Values confidence and self-expression ■ Willingness to move beyond over-reliance on atmosphere reading ■ Positive stance toward intercultural learning experiences
THUAS GROUP 6			
PM (Sociology)	■ Learning opening words in other languages, learning to say certain things correctly. ■ Approaches to coordinating tasks and completing them	■ Utilising technology (Google Translate) to traverse language barrier ■ Coordination of tasks across time zones ■ Managing working with colleagues with diverse backgrounds	■ Developed deeper curiosity to learn ■ More patience working with colleagues to get to result ■ Ready to apply COIL innovations into workplace

Participant	Knowledge (Intercultural / Disciplinary / Self-knowledge)	Skills (Social-emotional / Cognitive / Practical-digital)	Attitudes & Values
UFS			
PM (Sociology)	■ Learning opening words in other languages, learning to say certain things correctly. ■ Approaches to coordinating tasks and completing them	■ Utilising technology (Google Translate) to traverse language barrier ■ Coordination of tasks across time zones ■ Managing working with colleagues with diverse backgrounds	■ Developed deeper curiosity to learn ■ More patience working with colleagues to get to result ■ Ready to apply COIL innovations into workplace
NO (Education)	■ Cultural awareness ■ Appreciating differences in one's own and others' work ethics, perspectives and approaches	■ Multiple perspectives to problem-solving ■ More adept to using tools to get the message across	■ Deep cultural exchange ■ Developing relationships with colleagues ■ Listening for understanding
ZV (Education)	■ Cultural awareness, adapting approach to work to different approaches and work ethics ■ Understanding the nuances of connecting in space	■ Patience to overcome language barriers ■ Listening for understanding ■ Accommodating various cultures to work together	■ More open to other cultures, implementing inclusivity ■ Utilising COIL to fight marginalisation ■ Even when perspectives differ, COIL creates space to accommodate each other.
TRANSNATIONAL GROUP			
MS (Biomedical / Lab-based context) CU	■ Intercultural knowledge of symbolic and everyday cultural practices (e.g., greetings, peace narratives) ■ Contextual awareness of diversity within global learning spaces ■ Self-knowledge of communication tendencies and explanatory style	■ Active listening as epistemic practice ■ Perspective-taking across cultural differences ■ Reflexive self-monitoring of communication clarity ■ Organised, concise professional articulation	■ Commitment to unity and collective responsibility ■ Inclusion and accessibility ■ Ethical regard for equitable participation

Participant	Knowledge (Intercultural / Disciplinary / Self-knowledge)	Skills (Social-emotional / Cognitive / Practical-digital)	Attitudes & Values
DB (Business / International collaboration) THUAS	■ Recognition of linguistic proficiency as a contextual participation factor ■ Awareness of institutional and national working norms ■ Self-knowledge through unlearning assumptions	■ Adaptive coordination across time zones ■ Patience in multilingual interaction ■ Interpretive sensitivity to minimal or non-verbal responses ■ Problem-solving in asynchronous collaboration	■ Openness to revising preconceptions ■ Supportive orientation toward less confident peers ■ Fairness in shared responsibility
JA (Natural Sciences / Interdisciplinary context) UFS	■ Contextual knowledge of hierarchical vs egalitarian professional norms ■ Intercultural awareness of speech pace and participation comfort ■ Self-knowledge of positionality within group structures	■ Strategic communication adaptation for inclusivity ■ Time-zone coordination and distributed role allocation ■ Application of intercultural learning to professional settings ■ Soft-skill integration in collaborative environments	■ Psychological safety orientation ■ Non-competitive collaboration ethos ■ Empathy and mutual respect
JA (Natural Sciences / Interdisciplinary context) UFS VA (HRM / Leadership orientation) CU	■ Knowledge of cultural differences beyond national generalisation ■ Awareness of individual differences within intercultural settings ■ Emerging professional identity linked to inclusive leadership	■ Attentive listening for relational understanding ■ Conflict-sensitive communication ■ Collaborative problem-solving ■ Accommodation without escalation	■ Respect for individual dignity ■ Rejection of stereotyping ■ Commitment to ethical interpersonal

3.6 Data Analysis

The Story Circle data were analysed thematically and comparatively, following the principles of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). The analysis was conducted collaboratively across two researchers, each responsible for a defined set of cases: the research assistant from CU analysed four cases (CU, THUAS Group 5, THUAS Group 6, and the Transnational Story Circle), while a Postdoctoral researcher at UFS analysed two cases (THUAS Group 2 and UFS). A third research assistant, based at THUAS, contributed to data collection and transcription before departing from the project; the transcripts they produced formed the basis of the THUAS-based analyses.

Prior to analysis, all three researchers participated in a joint analytical orientation meeting conducted via MS Teams, in which the approach to coding, the role of the OECD K-S-A-V framework, and the project's thematic aims were discussed and agreed upon. This shared preparatory discussion was intended to support analytical coherence across distributed cases, consistent with recommended practice for collaborative qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Each researcher then analysed their respective cases independently, reading transcripts closely and coding in relation to recurring ideas, experiences, and patterns relevant to the project's aims. The analysis attended not only to what learning was reported by the participants, but also to how they narrated challenges, support, misunderstanding, reflection, and transfer into future work or study. Initial coding remained closely grounded in participants' wording and the contextual particularities of each case.

An initial cross-case thematic framework emerged through inductive analysis across the groups by two of the researchers. The provisional framework comprised six interrelated themes: Intercultural and contextual awareness; Communication and relational interaction; Collaboration structures and coordination; Reflexivity and learning to learn; Ethical orientation in collaboration; and Language and expressive development.

Researchers then engaged in iterative discussion to refine the themes, interrogate cross-case convergences and divergences, and ensure the framework was adequate to the material across all cases. Progress was periodically discussed with a wider group of institutional leads, whose feedback informed further analytical decisions. This layered inductive process of peer discussion and collaborative review is consistent with practices of peer debriefing and collaborative interpretive validation as credibility-enhancing strategies in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Nieuwenhuis & Jacobs, 2025).

The resulting themes were further synthesised using comparative tables that identified convergences, divergences, dominant patterns, and mechanisms of learning across contexts (see Tables 4, 5, and 6 below for more details). The analysis was also informed by the OECD K-S-A-V framework (OECD, 2020), which provided a useful interpretive lens for understanding how different dimensions of learning were articulated in participants' stories.



3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance for the COILing Careers project was obtained through UFS⁶ and from CU (see addenda). Survey data, obtained for project reporting purposes, and thus constituting secondary open access data were anonymised prior to analysis. Information sheets and consent forms were shared with all potential Story Circle participants. Participation in both phases of the project was voluntary, and all participants retained the right to withdraw at any point without consequence. For the Story Circle phase, an extensive consent procedure was followed to recognise the method's dialogic and personal nature. Participants received an information sheet and a consent form in advance of their session, allowing sufficient time to read both documents carefully before deciding whether to participate.

The signed consent form was required prior to participation; once received, participants were provided with the story circle manual, which outlined the session format, the prompts, the ground rules, and what would be expected of them, ensuring that they could make a fully informed decision about taking part (Deardorff, 2019).

Story Circle sessions were audio- and video-recorded. Verbal confirmation of consent to recording was obtained again immediately before each session began. For online sessions, participants were explicitly given the option to keep their cameras off if they preferred; this option was offered without pressure and without consequences for their participation. Story Circles were designed as respectful, facilitated spaces in which participants could share experiences without interruption or judgment, in accordance with the Story Circle protocol (Deardorff, 2019).

In reporting the data, names and all identifying details were anonymised, and particular care was taken to maintain confidentiality throughout the analytic and reporting processes. Participant codes reflect assigned initials used consistently throughout the analysis.

Because the Story Circle method invites personal reflection and interaction among participants, particular care was taken to maintain confidentiality throughout the analytic and reporting processes. The analysis, therefore, foregrounds themes, patterns, and illustrative extracts rather than presenting participants as individually identifiable cases.

⁶UFS-HSD2023/0245; UFS-HSD2023/0245

3.8 Methodological Reflections and Limitations

Several limitations and reflective considerations should be acknowledged. First, in the survey phase, the institutional distribution of survey respondents was uneven, and data was collected only during the early stages in the project (Pretorius & Mitchell, 2024), resulting in some institutions more prominently represented than others; findings from that strand should therefore be understood as illustrative of patterned variation rather than as statistically generalisable. In the Story Circle phase, a similar imbalance is evident in institutional representation: three Story Circle Groups were drawn from THUAS, while CU and the UFS each contributed one group. This means that the findings, while rich and analytically productive, may reflect the particular institutional culture, student profile, and COIL design of THUAS more prominently than those of the other participating institutions. Findings should thus be read with that distribution in mind, and future research would benefit from a more balanced multi-institutional qualitative design.

Second, the Story Circle phase involved a wider set of groups than those fully analysed here. Of the six THUAS groups, three (Groups 1, 3, and 4) were not taken forward into the final analytic stage and are therefore not included in the cross-case findings (as explained in section 3.4). Ultimately, the analyses presented in this study are based on the completed cases available for sustained cross-case interpretation.

Third, because Story Circles are dialogic and reflective, participants' accounts were shaped not only by their original COIL experiences but also by the storytelling context itself, by what others said, by the prompts used, and by the act of narrating experience aloud to an audience. This is not treated here as a weakness; indeed, it is consistent with the epistemological premise of narrative inquiry, which holds that meaning is constructed through storytelling rather than simply reported (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Bochner & Riggs, 2014). It does, however, mean that the data captures both experience and reflection on experience, and that the two cannot always be cleanly separated.

Fourth, the collaborative nature of the analytical process, with cases distributed between two researchers, periodic team discussions, and staged integration of analyses, raises questions about partiality, consistency and coherence. These were managed through shared analytical orientation, iterative inter-researcher discussion, and feedback from institutional leads, as described in Section 4.6. Some variation in the granularity of K-S-A-V entries across cases reflects the distributed authorship of the analysis; this is acknowledged in the participant overview (Section 4.5) and does not affect the integrity of the cross-case thematic synthesis, which was developed and refined collaboratively.





4. Survey data findings

This section presents findings from the survey phase of the iKudu project. The analysis draws on a final cleaned dataset of 93 completed responses and focuses on how students understood the novelty, intercultural value, career relevance, sustainability engagement, and ethical dimensions of their COIL experiences (see section 3.2 for more details). The purpose of this section is twofold. First, it identifies the broad patterns visible across institutions and disciplines. Second, it establishes the areas that require deeper exploration in the story circle phase, particularly where responses pointed to uneven experiences, underexplained contrasts, or the need to better understand how learning was actually produced.

4.1 Overview of the dataset

The final cleaned dataset comprised 93 completed responses drawn from multiple partner institutions and disciplinary areas (see Figures 1 and 2; Section 4.2). The largest contribution came from Hogeschool van Amsterdam (AUAS) ($n = 39$), followed by the Durban University of Technology (DUT) ($n = 19$), with smaller contributions from other partner institutions. The dataset therefore provides insight across multiple contexts, although institutional representation was uneven and findings should consequently be interpreted as identifying patterns and variations rather than statistically comparable institutional trends.

Responses were distributed across a range of disciplinary clusters, including business and economics, law, psychology and social work, education, linguistics and communication, engineering, and other interdisciplinary areas. This disciplinary diversity is analytically significant because it allows examination of how COIL was experienced and interpreted across different professional formation contexts.

Analysis of Question 2 responses further indicated substantial variation in students' prior exposure to international and intercultural learning. While some students reported previous engagement with international content or exchange experiences, many described the COIL project as their first meaningful opportunity to collaborate with peers across national and cultural boundaries. These differences in prior exposure shaped how students interpreted the COIL experience and provide important context for the findings that follow. Analysis of 87 of 93 Q2 responses (6 students left the answer blank) indicates that students entered the COIL practice with very uneven prior exposure to the international dimensions of their field. Approximately 34 students described this as their first meaningful international learning experience, responding with phrases such as ***"None"***, ***"Never"***, or ***"This was my first international project"***. A further 42 reported some prior engagement with international content through modules in international law, intercultural sensitivity, global citizenship, or international politics, but had not previously collaborated with international peers. Only around 10 students described prior international collaboration or exchange experience of a directly comparable kind. This distinction is analytically significant: many students had studied about international contexts in theory, but far fewer had actually worked across national and cultural boundaries in practice. One response captures the difference precisely: ***"Few, some literature courses and New Englishes, but those were all highly theoretical."*** For these students, COIL may have functioned as a shift from internationalisation as content to internationalisation as experience from something learned about to something enacted through communication, negotiation, and collaboration with peers from different contexts.

Prior experience also varied by discipline: law students tended to frame prior international learning through constitutional and international law; business students through global markets; health-related students through healthcare systems and diagnostic practice; and education and language students through culture, diversity, and cross-cultural communication. These differences matter because they shaped the vocabulary and expectations students brought to the COIL experience and helped explain some of the disciplinary variations visible in the findings.

Taken together, the dataset provides a useful overview of how students across multiple institutions and disciplinary areas experienced COIL, while also making visible the unevenness in prior exposure and disciplinary framing that contextualises what follows.

4.2 What was new to students in COIL

The first strong pattern in the survey data concerns the novelty of the COIL experience for students. For many respondents, the most unfamiliar aspect was not simply the online format, but the opportunity to collaborate with students from another country, university, discipline, or cultural background. Several responses described this as a first-time experience of international or intercultural learning in practice:

“This was the first time... to collaborate with students from abroad.”

“Podcasting... talking about our culture differences... I learnt more than I would learn from the news.”

“The global-citizenship aspects were new to me.”

Students also emphasised the novelty of comparative content, especially when projects addressed topics such as education systems, inclusive education, SDG 4, customary or labour law, AI and robotics legislation, child rights, or the impacts of COVID-19 across contexts.



A second area of novelty was communication. Students noted the challenge of navigating different languages, dialects, cultural norms, and meeting styles. This suggests that the **“newness”** of COIL was not only in the curriculum topic or international partner, but in the interactional demands it placed on students. For some, this was the first time they had to think actively about how to communicate with others whose assumptions, communicative practices, or linguistic repertoires differed from their own:

“Understanding different languages and dialects and how they are used in communication.”

“I have learned a lot about how to communicate with and how to approach people who have a different culture.”

Students also described the fully online and cross-border nature of collaboration as new in itself. This included the use of digital tools such as Miro, Padlet, podcasting, videography, blogging, and interactive website prototyping. In other words, novelty was both social and technological.

COIL introduced students not only to different people, but also to new formats of digital teamwork and output.

At the same time, a smaller group of respondents reported that little in the course felt new, either because they had prior COIL or international experience or because they saw overlap with their existing studies. This is an important reminder that novelty was unevenly distributed and likely shaped by prior exposure, disciplinary context, and institutional design.

Asked specifically which employability skills they had developed or strengthened (Q3), students named communication most frequently (approximately 53 mentions), followed closely by teamwork (46) and planning, organising, and time management (40). Problem-solving (22) and leadership (17) also appeared regularly, with smaller but analytically significant mentions of intercultural awareness (9) and patience, empathy, and openness (6). These figures should be treated as approximations, given variation in response length and phrasing.

However, the richer responses reveal that these skills were not developed in the abstract. Communication was experienced as difficult precisely because it was necessary for resolving misunderstandings and sustaining collaboration across differences: **“...Communication was not always easy.”** Planning and organising became important because COIL required coordination across time zones and uneven availability: **“Communication and planning/organising are the most important. Because we also had a different time zone, it was always hard to schedule a meeting where everyone could attend.”** Leadership often emerged not as a natural role but as a compensatory response to uneven group participation: **“Leadership, since I had to pull everyone to get to work and keep calling everyone to see how far we were on the project”; “I have taken it upon myself to take the lead since this was not being done by anyone else. But through communication with my team, we have come to a fine result in the end.”**

A smaller but analytically important group of responses framed employability not in terms of task performance but in terms of relational adaptability. These students described learning patience, empathy, and the ability to accommodate others' ways of working: **“Communication, patience, cultural diversity and empathy”; “What I did learn was that I had to let go more of my own ideas and planning to make things work more easily. Having to place myself in someone else's shoes. So, you could say I developed my empathy skills.”** These responses point toward an understanding of employability that conventional skills frameworks do not easily capture - one concerned with attitudes and values as much as with measurable competencies.

Not all accounts were positive. A small number of responses revealed strained or failed collaboration: **“None because there was no communication”; “... I feel like we had to put in much more effort from our side.”** These responses are returned to in Section 4.3, where the relationship between friction and career-relevant learning is examined more closely.

Overall, the survey data suggest that COIL introduced many students to new forms of intercultural encounter, comparative content, digital collaboration, and communicative challenge, while also beginning to develop the relational, adaptive, and ethically oriented capacities that underpin professional effectiveness in diverse environments. What remains less visible in these survey responses is how this learning was produced: the conditions, relationships, and moments of difficulty that made it possible. That question is taken up in the Story Circle phase.

4.3 Influence on views of future professional career

Survey responses also indicate that COIL influenced how many students thought about their future professional lives. One of the clearest patterns was a greater openness to international or intercultural work. Many students reported feeling more confident about the possibility of working abroad or collaborating across borders in future careers:

“I now know that I can work well interculturally.”

“It showed me my knowledge is valuable even abroad.”

“Step out of my Euro-centred approach and adapt to the client.”

Some explicitly stated that they now saw international work as more realistic or desirable, and a few connected the experience to aspirations of moving to countries such as the United Kingdom or the Netherlands. This shift in orientation from international work as an abstract possibility to something personally achievable suggests that COIL did not simply add knowledge about other cultures but began to reposition students' sense of professional possibility.

A second strong pattern concerns communication. Students repeatedly identified intercultural communication as central to future professional practice. This included not only speaking across differences but also being clear, patient, visible, and structured. Several responses pointed to specific professional behaviours: introducing oneself properly, using cameras in virtual meetings, structuring discussion so that quieter participants could contribute, and preparing for cultural differences in advance:

“Being aware that people work differently... I think it's easier to collaborate if you're just open to seeing how it will go.”

“It made me realise the importance of communication in the workplace across cultures.”

Others emphasised preparation and adaptability, researching a partner's cultural context in advance, remaining flexible, and being patient with different working styles and timelines. These responses suggest that students were not describing communication as a generic professional skill but as something they had experienced as concretely necessary and concretely difficult.

The survey data also reveal that COIL provided some students with a more realistic and at times sobering understanding of the difficulties involved in international collaboration. Several responses pointed to unstable internet connections, language gaps, different work rhythms, or difficulties with coordination as harder than expected:

“Working together... was much harder than expected... networking problems.”

“Communication and teamwork [were] the hardest part of this project. As there are things lost in translation and the purpose of this COIL project differs per country...”

A minority reported frustration, demotivation, or a preference for working with people who share a similar work ethic: ***“I prefer to work with people who have the same work ethic.”*** These responses are not treated here as evidence of COIL's failure. Rather, they are analytically important because they show that career-related learning did not emerge only from positive experiences. In some cases, students encountered the real conditions of global professional work, such as unequal effort, infrastructure asymmetry, and misaligned expectations and were left to make sense of that without always having the language or support to do so.



This finding echoes the Q3 pattern discussed in Section 4.2, where leadership and problem-solving often emerged not as planned competence development but as compensatory responses to collaboration that was harder than expected. It also anticipates one of the central arguments of the story circle analysis: that the developmental value of difficulty depends on whether students are supported in processing it rather than simply enduring it.

At the same time, a number of responses suggest that the experience had a broader impact on values and worldview. Some students reflected on stepping outside Eurocentric assumptions, realising that their professional knowledge could be valuable abroad, or becoming more attentive to issues of gender equality and global citizenship:

“It made me a better global citizen.”

“Seeing how people in other countries are living made me see the world in another angle.”

These responses suggest a form of career development that is not purely instrumental. Students were not only acquiring communication techniques or coordination strategies; some were revising their sense of what professional responsibility means in a globally interconnected field.

Taken together, the responses suggest that COIL influenced students' professional thinking by expanding their sense of where and how they could work, while also making visible the communicative, intercultural, and adaptive demands of global professional life. The survey data capture these shifts in orientation, but they cannot easily explain how they came about or what made them durable. That question of how career-relevant learning is actually produced is taken up in the story circle phase.

4.4 Intercultural competence compared with experiences at home

When asked how COIL had added to their intercultural competence compared with intercultural experiences at home, students described a mixed but revealing picture. For many, the experience represented their first opportunity to work meaningfully with people outside their own country or continent - a pattern consistent with the Q2 finding that a substantial proportion of students had no prior international collaboration experience. In those cases, students described growth in self-awareness, patience, flexibility, and communication sensitivity:

“I learned to manage my expectations and be more open to different ways of communicating.”

“It taught me patience, sometimes just do something if no one is willing to do it.”

However, other respondents, particularly those already embedded in highly diverse home environments or with prior intercultural experience, reported less dramatic change. This suggests that COIL did not have a uniform intercultural effect: its significance depended partly on what students had already encountered in everyday life and study, reinforcing the point made in Section 4.1 that prior exposure shapes how the COIL experience is interpreted and how much it feels transformative.

A recurring theme was awareness of one's own cultural lens. Several students noted that they had approached collaboration from a European or home-culture perspective without initially realising it. Through the project, they became more aware that assumptions about punctuality, communication, task pacing, or directness were not universally shared:

“I look at everything from a very European perspective; little cultural differences surprised me.”

This self-awareness often accompanied a more flexible and deliberate stance toward others' ways of working. Students described adjusting how they spoke, how they structured questions, and how they made space for peers whose communication style differed from their own.

Students also emphasised communication growth. Some referred to clearer English, better ways of asking questions, more neutral phrasing to avoid offence, or greater sensitivity in how they approached meetings:

“I tried to talk in a neutral way to make them feel comfortable.”

“I learned how to communicate with and how to approach people who have a different culture.”

For others, intercultural competence was linked to patience and the management of practical differences: bandwidth constraints, time zones, and different work rhythms. This suggests that students often understood intercultural competence not as abstract cultural knowledge but as the ability to adjust expectations and act effectively amid differences. In this sense, the survey responses point toward a situated, practice-oriented understanding of intercultural competence, rather than the static cultural knowledge associated with older models of the construct.

Responses also revealed a stronger emphasis on empathy and respect among students who had found the experience genuinely challenging. Some stated that they now had a better understanding that practices, values, or views on mental health and wellbeing differed across contexts. Others explicitly used the language of global citizenship or mutual responsibility:

“Talking about how Western and African cultures view mental health made me reconsider my own assumptions.”

“Seeing how people in other countries are living made me see the world in another angle.”

At the same time, not all responses were affirmative. A minority expressed frustration, sometimes using deficit-oriented language such as ***“bare minimum”*** or ***“work ethic,”*** and a few stated that COIL had not significantly added to their intercultural competence, either because they already felt internationally experienced or because the collaboration had been too limited to generate meaningful learning:

“None because there was no communication.”

These responses are important. They suggest that intercultural competence does not develop simply through exposure to difference, but through encounters that are sustained, supported, and processed. Where collaboration was thin, performative, or strained, the intercultural learning potential of COIL was not realised.

Overall, the survey data suggest that COIL exchange often enhanced intercultural competence by making students more aware of differences, more reflective about their own assumptions, and more intentional in how they communicated and collaborated. The unevenness of these accounts, however, indicates that intercultural learning is shaped by prior exposure, task design, and the quality of interaction itself. Understanding how that learning was actually produced through which moments, relationships, and processes required deeper inquiry during the story circle phase.



4.5 Sustainable Development Goals engagement

The survey data revealed considerable variation in the extent to which the Sustainable Development Goals were discussed within COIL across institutions and disciplines. The University of Siena (US) reported the strongest engagement, with 90.0% of students selecting ***“Quite a bit”*** or ***“A lot”***. High levels were also seen at the University of Venda (Univen) (70.0%), DUT (68.4%), and the University of Limpopo (UL) (66.7%). In contrast, AUAS (51.3%) and the Central University of Technology (CUT) (50.0%) showed moderate levels of engagement, while the University of Antwerp (UA) (0%) and THUAS (0%) reported no strong engagement (See Table 2). These figures suggest that smaller institutions with focused disciplinary participation tended to demonstrate higher SDG engagement than larger, more diversified ones, though institutional size alone does not explain the pattern: what mattered most was how the COIL task was framed.

Table 2: University-Level Responses on SDG Discussion During the COIL Project, Including Top-Two-Box Scores

University	Not at all	Very little	Some-what	Quite a bit	A lot	Top 2	Top 2%
AUAS	5	4	10	14	6	20	51.30%
DUT	0	2	4	8	5	13	68.40%
US	0	0	1	5	4	9	90.00%
Univen	0	0	1	5	4	7	70.00%
UL	1	0	1	2	2	4	66.70%
CUT	0	2	0	1	1	2	50.00%
UA	0	2	1	0	0	0	0.00%
THUAS	0	0	1	0	0	0	0.00%

These variations make clear that SDG engagement was not an automatic by-product of international collaboration. Rather, it depended heavily on whether the COIL brief explicitly embedded sustainability concerns into the assignment design. Where this embedding was present, students consistently reported strong and meaningful engagement. Where it was absent, the goals tended to remain peripheral or entirely invisible.

Two conditions consistently drove stronger engagement. The first was explicit curricular anchoring. Where the brief directly centred SDG 4 (Quality Education) or linked tasks to specific sustainability goals, students reported clear and purposeful engagement:

“Education for all was the main subject.”
(Business, AUAS)

“We focused on SDG 4 education for all.”
(Radiography, DUT)

“We spoke about the Sustainable Development Goals in general and gender inequalities.”
(Political Science, US)

The second condition was comparative inquiry.

Projects that required students to examine differences or similarities between national contexts deepened SDG engagement by giving it a concrete and relational dimension:

“We had the opportunity to enrich our knowledge about religious and cultural traditions and explored common themes.”
(Political Science, US)

“Seeing how people in other countries are living made me see the world in another angle.”
(Psychology, Univen)

By contrast, where the assignment brief did not clearly align with the SDGs, engagement was often weak or absent. This was particularly apparent in some business and economics contexts, where students described sustainability as peripheral to the task:

“The tasks were not that connected to sustainability.”
(Communication, THUAS)

“It was not discussed; it wasn't the meaning of the assignment.”
(Economics, AUAS)

“They were probably explained but I don't remember it.”
(Economics, AUAS)

Process frictions also constrained engagement. A few students reported limited interaction, coordination difficulties, or communication reduced to WhatsApp exchanges, which left little space for conceptual discussion:

“There wasn't a lot of communication between the students.”
(Economics, AUAS)

“We never spoke on Zoom, only on WhatsApp about the project.”
(Economics, AUAS)

These responses are significant because they suggest that SDG engagement requires not only curricular design but also the conditions for genuine collaboration. Where interaction was thin, even well-designed tasks could not activate meaningful engagement with sustainability themes.

Overall, the findings indicate that COIL can support SDG-related learning effectively, but only when the goals are intentionally integrated into the

curriculum and made meaningful in practice through authentic disciplinary tasks and real cross-border dialogue. The unevenness visible in this data is not incidental: it reflects the extent to which different institutions and disciplines had embedded sustainability in the COIL brief, and the extent to which collaboration was sustained enough to create space for conceptual discussion.

4.6 Engagement with ethical aspects of the field and profession

The survey findings on professional ethics reveal a similarly uneven pattern across institutions and disciplines. US reported the strongest engagement, with 88.9% of students selecting **“Quite a bit”** or **“A lot”**. High levels were also observed at the UL (83.3%), Univen (70.0%), and the UA (66.7%). In contrast, DUT (27.8%) and AUAS (28.2%) showed considerably more modest engagement. The CUT (50.0%) fell in the middle range (See Table 3). These figures, read alongside the SDG data in Section 5.6, suggest a consistent pattern: institutions and disciplines where the COIL brief embedded substantive professional or societal concerns generated stronger engagement across both dimensions.

Table 3: University-Level Responses on Ethical Aspects Discussed During COIL Practice, Including Top-Two-Box Scores

University	Not at all	Very little	Some-what	Quite a bit	A lot	Top 2	Top 2%
AUAS	7	6	15	5	6	11	28.20%
DUT	7	3	3	2	3	5	27.80%
US	0	0	1	2	6	8	88.90%
Univen	0	0	3	4	3	7	70.00%
UL	1	0	0	3	2	5	83.30%
CUT	0	0	2	0	2	2	50.00%
UA	0	1	0	2	0	2	66.70%
THUAS	0	0	0	0	1	1	100.00%

Where ethics was visible in student responses, it took meaningfully different forms depending on disciplinary context. In Law and related fields, ethics was framed around professional conduct, formal client communication, copyright, plagiarism, and IRAC-style legal reasoning:

“It was part of the assignment; we were discussing copyright infringement.”
(Linguistics, UA)

“We were supposed to advise them on copyright law they had to comply with copyright laws.”
(Law, UL)

“Keep the conversation with the client formal and how to carry myself as a lawyer.”
(Law, UL)

“Plagiarism was discussed a lot.”
(Law, UL)

In Psychology and social work contexts, ethics was framed in terms of wellbeing, cultural perspectives on mental health, and equity:

“As a psychology student, many aspects regarding my profession were discussed.”
(Psychology, Univen)

“Talking about how Western and African cultures view mental health.”
(Psychology, Univen)

In communications and political science contexts, decolonisation and representation emerged as central ethical themes:

“The whole topic was decolonisation how African culture is seen in Europe.”
(Communication, THUAS)

These disciplinary differences are not simply a matter of different content. They reflect fundamentally different professional formation contexts in which the meaning of ethics is constituted.



Law students understood ethics as procedural and client-facing; psychology students understood it as relational and culturally situated; political science and communications students understood it as structural and historical. COIL, in each case, gave students an international partner context through which to comparatively examine those disciplinary ethics.

Where discussions on ethics were weak or absent, students were direct about the reasons.

Radiography students at DUT noted that professional ethics had not arisen in a project focused on COVID-19 and education, and that cross-faculty pairings without an explicit ethics bridge left the dimension entirely unaddressed:

“We only discussed educational topics.”
(Radiography, DUT)

“It didn't relate to radiography.”
(Radiography, DUT)

“We are from different faculties.”
(Radiography, DUT)

“Issues of legal ethics were not at all addressed.”
(Law, UL)

These responses are analytically important. They suggest that where the disciplinary bridge between the COIL task and students' professional formation was weak, ethics remained invisible regardless of institutional intent. Cross-faculty pairings appear to have been particularly susceptible to this gap: without a shared professional frame, students had no obvious basis for recognising ethical dimensions in their collaboration.

Even so, a smaller number of responses indicate that indirect ethical learning could occur through the collaboration itself, independently of formal task design. Some students recognised that intercultural teamwork, inclusion, and navigating difference were themselves ethically significant, even when no explicit ethics brief had been set. This suggests that COIL carries a latent ethical dimension - one concerned with how people treat one another across difference that does not depend on disciplinary content but that tends to remain diffuse unless it is named and supported.

Overall, the survey data indicate that COIL can serve as a powerful platform for professional ethics learning, but that this potential is unevenly realised. Like SDG engagement, ethics engagement depends strongly on disciplinary framing, task design, and facilitation. Where ethics was explicitly embedded, students often described transformative or professionally meaningful insights. Where it was absent or weakly signposted, students named the gap clearly. This parallel between the SDG and ethics findings points toward a single underlying principle: that the learning value of COIL is not self-generating but design dependent. Understanding how students experienced and made sense of that design, where it opened up ethical reflection and where it foreclosed it, was taken forward into the story circle phase.

4.7 Cross-disciplinary patterns in the survey data

Across disciplines, the survey findings suggest that COIL acted as a transversal learning environment in which students developed a broadly shared set of capabilities, even when the disciplinary content of their projects differed considerably. Students from Law, Radiography, Engineering, Education, Psychology, International Relations, Business, Linguistics, and Creative and Design fields all described forms of intercultural communication, online collaboration, expectation-setting, flexibility, patience, and leadership as competences they had developed or strengthened. This convergence indicates that COIL may support a cross-disciplinary employability profile that is not dependent on any single subject matter.

At the same time, the strongest evidence of impact appeared where the task mirrored authentic disciplinary practice. Law students emphasised interviewing clients, advising across jurisdictions, and engaging with copyright or legal responsibility. Students in health-related fields highlighted patient-facing communication, inclusivity, and empathy, though some noted a lack of direct clinical application. Education students referred to inclusive pedagogical design and decolonising curriculum debates linked to SDG 4. Business and economics students pointed to negotiation, cross-cultural etiquette, and leadership in international contexts. Political Science and International Relations students foregrounded global citizenship, gender equality, and North-South dynamics. These responses suggest that COIL was most meaningful when it felt connected to real professional work rather than to a generic international exercise. Value is most significant when tasks mirror authentic disciplinary practice.

Another important cross-disciplinary pattern concerns confidence and self-awareness. Across fields, students frequently described becoming more aware of their own cultural assumptions, more confident in international teamwork, and more able to articulate their learning in relation to future professional life through CVs, interviews, or reflective accounts of their own development. This matters because it suggests that COIL not only develops competences but also supports the reflective articulation of those competences, which is itself an employability-relevant capacity.

These findings are understood here in relation to the OECD Learning Compass 2030 (OECD, 2020) and its Anticipation-Action-Reflection (A-A-R) cycle (Beelen, 2015; Wimpenny et al., 2022). In the present data, anticipation was visible when students identified culturally embedded issues - SDG 4, decolonisation, and cross-cultural mental health frameworks

and adjusted their approaches in advance. Action was evident in the cross-border collaborative work itself: coordinating across time zones, navigating language differences, and managing group dynamics. Reflection was most clearly present in students' re-evaluation of their own positionalities, professional assumptions, and communicative defaults. Beelen and Jones' (2015) framework of laH, which emphasises the purposeful integration of intercultural dimensions into the curriculum for all students and not only the mobile few, provides a complementary lens: the COIL experience functioned precisely as this kind of embedded internationalisation, making intercultural learning available without requiring physical mobility. Wimpenny et al., (2022) conceptualise COIL as a transformative Third Space in which reflection, equity, and global engagement converge - a framing that resonates particularly in contexts where North-South asymmetries and decolonisation themes were made explicit by the task design.

Mapping the findings to the OECD K-S-A-V framework (OECD, 2020) helps clarify the disciplinary variation observed across sections 5.2 to 5.6. Knowledge gains included policy and SDG literacy, as well as domain-specific professional ethics. Skills centred on intercultural communication, online teamwork, structured feedback, and problem-solving under conditions of ambiguity. Attitudes encompassed openness, curiosity, and tolerance for different working rhythms and communication styles. Values were most visible where students named fairness, inclusion, and professional responsibility as motivating their conduct. Critically, the complete K-S-A-V cycle was most fully activated when COIL tasks reflected authentic disciplinary practice: when tasks were perceived as disconnected from professional realities, students tended to default to task completion without deeper engagement, and the K-S-A-V signal weakened accordingly.

Taken together, the survey data suggest that COIL supported both global readiness and the capacity to engage adaptively with transnational professional contexts and to practice reflectively, including the habit of questioning one's own assumptions, ethics, and positionality. These two dimensions reinforce each other: global readiness is strengthened when students can also reflect critically on their own cultural defaults, and reflective practice is deepened when it is grounded in real cross-border encounters. The K-S-A-V framework is useful here not only as a descriptive map of outcomes but as an evaluative lens: it makes visible which dimensions of learning were activated and which were not, and it points toward the design conditions under which fuller activation becomes possible.

4.8 Synthesis from the survey data phase

The survey findings identify several important and interconnected patterns. First, many students experienced COIL as a genuinely novel form of learning, particularly in relation to international collaboration, intercultural communication, and digital teamwork. For a substantial proportion of participants, this was their first sustained encounter with international peers - a shift from internationalisation as theoretical content to internationalisation as lived practice, as the Q2 data made clear. Second, students frequently connected COIL to their future professional lives, describing gains in confidence, communicative adaptability, and openness to international work. Third, engagement with the Sustainable Development Goals and with professional ethics was often meaningful but highly uneven: where these dimensions were explicitly embedded in the brief and anchored to authentic disciplinary practice, students reported substantive learning; where they were absent or weakly signposted, students named the gap directly. Fourth, across disciplines, the survey data suggest that COIL supported both transferable competences and increased self-awareness, with the K-S-A-V framework providing a useful map of how these dimensions were distributed and where they were most fully activated.

Two further patterns deserve particular emphasis because they shape the analytical agenda of Phase 2. The first is the relationship between friction and learning. Across Q3, Q4, and Q5, a recurring finding was that some of the most significant developments in competence, leadership, patience, empathy, and adaptability did not emerge from smooth collaboration but from situations where things were difficult. Students who named these capacities did so precisely because they had been tested. At the same time, a minority of responses suggest that difficulty without support produced frustration, disengagement, or deficit framing rather than

growth. The line between productive friction and demoralising friction is not visible in the survey data; understanding where and why that line was crossed required a different kind of inquiry.

The second pattern is the design-dependency of learning. Whether students engaged with SDGs, professional ethics, intercultural communication, or reflective self-awareness depended less on individual motivation than on whether the task design created conditions for those forms of engagement. This is consistent with the broader argument that COIL outcomes are not automatic: they are produced through specific combinations of task framing, disciplinary anchoring, collaboration quality, and facilitation. The survey data can identify where these conditions were or were not present, but it cannot explain how students experienced them, what made particular moments significant, or how learning was actually produced through interaction.

These are the questions that the survey data raised but could not fully answer. The written survey format, for all its breadth, carries inherent expressive constraints: students must articulate complex, ambivalent, or only partially formed experiences within the space of a few sentences, without the benefit of a follow-up prompt. The most significant learning that was gradual, relational, or hard to name was precisely the learning least likely to appear fully formed in a text response. The Story Circle phase was designed to address this directly: not simply to collect more data, but to create the reflective, dialogic conditions in which the patterns identified here could be inhabited, interrogated, and more fully understood.



5. Story Circle Findings

The second phase of this study used Story Circles to deepen and contextualise the patterns identified in the survey phase. While the quantitative findings established the broad contours of students' COIL experiences, such as what felt new, what influenced their professional thinking, how intercultural competence developed, and where SDG and ethics engagement was strong or weak, they could not fully explain how those experiences were produced, what made particular moments significant, or how students made sense of challenge, difference, and growth over time.

The Story Circle sessions were designed to address these questions precisely. By creating a structured but open dialogic space, they enabled participants to narrate, reflect on, and collectively interpret their COIL experiences in ways that written survey responses alone cannot support (Deardorff, 2019; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

The analysis of the Story Circle data is organised around six cross-case themes, developed inductively from four cases (CU, Group 5 (THUAS), Group 6 (THUAS), and the Transnational Story Circle) by one researcher, and the rest (Group 2 (THUAS) and UFS) cases were analysed by another researcher. The six cross-case analytic themes with the convergences and divergences are presented below (See Table 4 on page 46).

Table 4 Convergences and Divergences in Themes Across Story Circle Contexts

Cross-case analytic theme	Convergences (shared across cases)	CU emphasis	THUAS Group 2 emphasis	THUAS Group 5 emphasis	THUAS Group 6 emphasis	UFS emphasis	Transnational emphasis
Theme 1: Intercultural and contextual awareness	■ Participants recognise that expectations around communication, collaboration, and participation are shaped by cultural, institutional, and professional contexts.	■ Awareness is linked to disciplinary, educational, professional contexts, especially how work practices and priorities differ across settings.	■ Awareness centred around differences in work ethic, communication, and task approach. ■ Differences emerged even in collaboration behaviours with the counterpart.	■ Awareness emerges through contrasting expectations around punctuality, commitment, and how collaboration should be organised in practice.	■ Awareness focuses on differing norms around opinion expression, reading social atmosphere, and participating in discussion.	■ Task orientation was different between the two different groups. ■ The group interacted with approaches ranging from very casual to very rigid. ■ There was a need; adaptation was critical in expressing cultural awareness.	■ Awareness centres on cultural complexity, multilingual recognition, and sensitivity to differing professional and interactional norms.
Theme 2: Communication and relational interaction	■ Participants recognise communication as central to understanding, inclusion, and successful collaboration across difference.	■ Emphasis on active listening, inclusive explanation, and adaptation, and communication accountability.	■ Communication with Japanese counterparts was minimal, and there was very low relational contact between the groups; however, the internal group dynamic in terms of teamwork and communication was very healthy.	■ Communication is framed through responsiveness, openness, and the quality of relational interaction within teamwork.	■ Communication is framed through hesitation, opinion sharing, and contrasting norms around direct expression and participation.	■ Communication styles between various counterparts are stretched from very casual to very rigid, and previous experience had to be applied to find the right balance at all times.	■ Emphasis on dialogue across linguistic and cultural difference, including pacing, interpretive generosity, and enabling expression.

Cross-case analytic theme	Convergences (shared across cases)	CU emphasis	THUAS Group 2 emphasis	THUAS Group 5 emphasis	THUAS Group 6 emphasis	UFS emphasis	Transnational emphasis
Theme 3: Collaboration and structures and coordination	■ Participants encounter challenges related to organising group work, managing participation, and coordinating tasks across distributed settings.	■ Coordination is framed as a transferable professional teamwork competence, especially in relation to time zones and unstable group structures	■ Collaboration in this group was strongly driven by local group working norms from the local culture, in contrast to the counterpart, which was high production but low collaboration.	■ Dominant focus on punctuality, accountability, and shared responsibility in sustaining collaboration.	■ Collaboration is shaped by asynchronous digital workflow, uneven participation, and the negotiation of responsibility in online group work.	■ Collaboration was developed as the call continued with a balance, with different types of balances having to be found for different types of culture.	■ Collaboration is shaped by global coordination, uneven participation, and the need to create conditions that make contribution possible.
Theme 4: Reflexivity and learning to learn	■ Participants reflect on how their own assumptions, communication habits, and participation patterns shape collaboration and learning.	■ Reflexivity is linked to communication accountability, self regulation, and professional development	■ Reflexivity was shown in the ability to consistently accommodate and adjust modalities in teamwork and communication and coordination to enable the task to be completed.	■ Reflexivity focuses on reassessing collaboration conditions while becoming more aware of one's own communicative limits and confidence in participation.	■ Reflexivity appears through increasing self awareness about hesitation, confidence, and communication norms.	■ Personal and work-related experience is utilized to activate the reflexivity loop, which enabled the development of quick solutions to mismatches that emerged between the group and its counterparts	■ Reflexivity centres on questioning assumptions, stereotypes, and one's own cultural positioning in intercultural interaction.

Cross-case analytic theme	Convergences (shared across cases)	CU emphasis	THUAS Group 2 emphasis	THUAS Group 5 emphasis	THUAS Group 6 emphasis	UFS emphasis	Transnational emphasis
Theme 5: Ethical orientation in collaboration	Participants evaluate collaboration in normative terms, emphasising responsibility, fairness, inclusion, respect, and supportive participation	Inclusion, consideration, and accommodation are emphasised as ethical responsibilities in collaborative and professional environments.	Teamwork, collaboration, and coordination were very highly rated ethical attributes and were highly promoted to execute and finish the task, and it was extended to the COIL counterparts	Ethical orientation becomes visible through expectations of seriousness, reliability, mutual support, and relational connection	Ethical orientation centres on care for others' participation, interactional sensitivity, and creating conditions in which people feel able to contribute	A fair balance was developed between the relaxed work ethic of American counterparts and the rigid work ethic of the Russian counterparts. The latter approach emphasized highly organized and non-stop focus on the task	Values emphasise empathy, support, non-judgement, and the intentional creation of safe conditions for participation
Theme 6: Language and expressive development	Participants recognise language and expression as important to participation, collaboration, and being understood across difference.	Language is linked to professional clarity, brevity, and effective expression in diverse work settings.	Very limited linguistic interaction with a high degree of difference between the group's common language and their counterparts' common language. Most communication task-oriented.	Language development appears through using English in practice, especially in relation to confidence, participation, and different communicative demands	Strong emphasis on English vocabulary development, opinion expression, and growing confidence in speaking and participation	Not much resistance in language and expressive development, but reflexivity and patience are needed to apply language to the completion of tasks.	Language is framed not only as a communicative resource, but also as a relational and inclusive practice in intercultural interaction

5.1 Theme 1: Developing Intercultural Awareness and Perspective-Taking Through COIL Exchange

A first major cross-case pattern concerns intercultural and contextual awareness. Across the six contexts, participants repeatedly described becoming more aware that communication, collaboration, participation, and professional expectations are shaped by cultural, institutional, and disciplinary settings rather than being universal or self-evident. In some cases, this awareness emerged through direct contrast between national or educational norms; in others, it developed through exposure to different working styles, assumptions, or ways of organising group tasks. As reflected in Table 4, intercultural and contextual awareness appeared across the cases but with different emphases: in CU, it was closely linked to disciplinary and professional contexts; in Group 2, it was shaped by limited interaction with Japanese students and by differences in communication and work ethic; in Group 5, it was often shaped by contrasting expectations around punctuality, commitment, and collaboration; in Group 6, it was especially visible through differing norms around expressing opinions, reading social atmosphere, and participating in discussion; in UFS, it emerged through comparison across different COIL partners and the need to adapt to different cultural and academic contexts; and in the Transnational setting, it centred on cultural comparison, multilingual awareness, and the recognition of difference within international learning spaces. Across the cases, then, students did not simply encounter differences; they learned to recognise that their own ways of working, speaking, and interpreting others were situated rather than universal.



In the CU case, intercultural and contextual awareness was frequently narrated through specific study and work situations in which participants had to make sense of different communication styles, present and/or future professional priorities, and disciplinary relevance. DS's account is especially useful because it demonstrates how intercultural awareness emerged not from abstract comparison but from collaboration in a concrete task context. Reflecting on her X-Culture project with peers from the US and Dubai, she described how encountering different expectations about meetings and report writing challenged what she had previously taken as normal:

“So we had gathered to do... this project, and through this project we were supposed to understand how different cultures work and how to collaborate with people from all over the world and understand their way of work, I guess so.”

DS, CU

DS explicitly frames cultural difference through work and collaboration rather than through general national comparison. Her awareness is not only that others are different, but that these differences matter for how people organise tasks, communicate, and make decisions. She extends this by reflecting on contrasting priorities within the project:

“This girl... was more like worrying about... the looks of the report... rather than, you know, what we actually had to report... as UK students were focused more on what we actually had to do.”

DS, CU

This observation reveals contextual awareness as an understanding of how academic and professional practices are prioritised differently in different settings. In the same project, DS also linked cultural collaboration to contextual business knowledge, particularly in relation to the Dubai market:

“...the business that we had to propose was this medical speech impairment niche business... and we had research that in Dubai there were not a lot of medical businesses that proposed this... so, we had thought that maybe it would be nice if we could integrate this business into Dubai.”

DS, CU

Here, intercultural awareness is closely intertwined with professional and disciplinary understanding. Students were not simply noticing national differences; they were learning how cultural and institutional contexts shape working practices, market assumptions, and expectations relevant to future careers. Difference becomes a resource for seeing possibilities that may otherwise remain invisible.

A similar form of comparative learning is evident in SM's reflection on working with German students. Her account makes clear that intercultural awareness was co-produced through her own positionality as an international student in the UK:

“It was honestly an amazing experience because it showed me how the German education system works. At the same time, being an international student in the UK also helped me better understand UK culture. You don't really see these differences until you actually work with people from those places.”
SM, CU

Here, contextual awareness emerges through comparison between educational systems and through the participant's own position as an international student. This is important because it shows that intercultural learning is not only about learning about “*others*,” but also about understanding one's own situation more clearly in relation to different institutional settings. In this sense, COIL VE created a comparative learning space in which participants simultaneously interpreted multiple contexts. This is highly relevant to Coiling Careers because it suggests that career-relevant intercultural competence involves not only understanding others but also re-situating oneself within changing institutional and professional environments.

In the THUAS Group 2, the primary context was a joint task with a Japanese university, in which much of the work was completed independently by groups. However, the intended collaborative exercise was limited by reduced interaction with the Japanese students, as well as by differences in cultural approaches and work ethic when interaction did occur. TE's reflection captures this clearly:

“...I feel like we didn't have enough time to really bond with the Japanese students. It was sometimes a little bit quiet during the online COIL. But in the end, it worked out and we made a great video...”

TE, Group 2

This account suggests that intercultural and contextual awareness can emerge even when collaboration is experienced as limited or uneven. TE's reflection points to the importance of interactional time, bonding, and communication in shaping whether students experience COIL as genuinely collaborative. At the same time, the fact that the group **"made a great video"** shows that limited interaction did not prevent task completion, but it did shape the quality and depth of intercultural engagement. Group 2, therefore, adds an important contrast to the other cases: intercultural awareness was not only produced through rich exchange, but also through noticing the absence or insufficiency of sustained interaction.

In Group 5, intercultural and contextual awareness took on a more pragmatic form, often emerging through contrasts in expectations around punctuality, communication, and group expectations. CR's account of waiting for Mexican peers to join a meeting illustrates how a routine organisational issue became interpreted as a cultural learning moment:

"We in the Netherlands like to be strict and on time... and there was like, we were waiting 25 minutes, 25, 30 minutes, no response, 45 minutes... and then suddenly there was like two women from Mexico, and they were coming into the meeting and with their face and with their expression, like yeah, this is normal."
CR, Group 5

What this reveals is not simply frustration about lateness, but an emerging awareness that assumptions about time and commitment are culturally and contextually shaped. Importantly, CR's narrative also includes adaptation, as the group changed its expectations for future meetings. CE reinforced this contrast by noting that the difference was recognised by both sides:

"The Mexican students also said like, yeah, the Dutch students are very strict with time and stuff like that... There's really a big difference."
CE, Group 5

At the same time, IS complicated what might otherwise become an easy cultural narrative by describing the **"exact opposite"** experience with another group:

"The Mexican students were really nice and polite and on time, but the Swiss students never came, never replied, never did anything. So for me, that was totally different."
IS, Group 5

This observation is valuable because it unsettles straightforward expectations about national behaviour. Intercultural awareness in Group 5, therefore, develops not only through noticing differences but also through recognising that expectations can be overturned in practice. IS makes this even clearer when she reflects more generally on future work:

"Being aware that people work differently... I think it's easier to collaborate if you're just open to seeing how it will go."
IS, Group 5

This suggests that the key learning is not simply **"Mexican students are more flexible with time"** or any other fixed conclusion. Rather, it is an awareness that people and groups work differently, and that collaboration depends on being open to how those differences play out in context.

In Group 6, intercultural and contextual awareness was especially visible in differing norms around classroom participation and social atmosphere, particularly the contrast between expressing opinions and **"reading the room."** AA's reflections are central here:

“My personality is very Japanese. Read the room and see everyone’s pace... But students in the Netherlands, they tend to start more.”

AA, Group 6

AA’s account shows intercultural awareness emerging through differences in interactional expectations. What is being recognised here is not only a difference in personality, but a broader contextual norm about when and how people speak. Group 6, therefore, adds an important layer to the cross-case analysis: intercultural awareness is not limited to national customs or time management, but also includes educational and interactional norms around initiative, atmosphere, and participation.

In the UFS case, intercultural and contextual awareness was highlighted through the differences and similarities participants experienced in their interactions with different COIL counterparties. Participants described different experiences with different countries and indicated that they used different approaches to address these differences. MT, for instance, compares her experience with American and Russian students:

“...I do agree as well with the Americans culturally; it kind of blended. I was comfortable with them, but then as well, the Russians were totally different, totally different in a cultural and academic context...”

MT, UFS

This account shows how intercultural awareness was developed relationally and comparatively. Rather than describing COIL as a single intercultural experience, MT distinguishes between different partner contexts, suggesting that some collaborations felt culturally familiar or comfortable, while others required greater adjustment. The UFS case, therefore, reinforces the importance of context-specific awareness: students did not encounter “international collaboration” as one uniform experience, but as a set of differently configured cultural and academic relationships.

Previous experiences also played a crucial role in helping participants navigate new cultural awareness and contextual problems that emerged from COIL interactions.

The Transnational Story Circles deepen this theme by showing that intercultural awareness often involves unlearning assumptions and resisting overgeneralisation. DB provided the clearest example of this when reflecting on her expectations about Japanese students:

“I ruined all of my misconceptions regarding the culture, especially Japanese, because I was initially thinking that... students should be... proactive... because they’re from Japan... from the films... But they are not in my experience. And I was completely shocked.”
DB, Transnational

This is a particularly rich quote because it demonstrates intercultural awareness as epistemic disruption. DB is not simply learning a new cultural fact; she is confronting her prior assumptions and revising them in light of experience. The mechanism here is clearly dialogic reflexivity: contact through COIL VE and subsequent reflection in the story circle enabled her to recognise how her expectations had been shaped by mediated or stereotyped cultural imaginaries rather than direct experience.

MS develops the point further by challenging the idea that institutional prestige or nationality can reliably predict behaviour:

“If we assume that... all Japanese students... they must be from a very good university... then if... students from that university cannot show proactiveness... that does state that every type of people are present in every type of culture.”
MS, Transnational

MS's account moves beyond **"difference"** to explore variation within groups. JA's explicit recognition of cultural complexity and difference within international interaction is especially useful here:

"Some societies are more hierarchical structured and others more egalitarian... Who do I speak to if I want to go approach things appropriately without stepping on the toes of someone else... just because I'm very non-hierarchical... doesn't mean it's the same for the other person..."

JA, Transnational

This quote shows that intercultural awareness in the Transnational case is not limited to noticing visible cultural differences. It also involves understanding that professional and communicative norms, such as how hierarchy should be handled, vary across contexts and require adjustment. JA's account is particularly strong because it connects this awareness directly to current work, showing that the learning gained through COIL carries over into professional practice.

MS adds another important dimension when reflecting on language and intercultural recognition:

"If somebody from another culture says Salaam to me, that'd be like whoa... let's be friends."

MS, Transnational

Although brief, this observation is analytically rich because it shows that intercultural awareness can emerge through small acts of recognition that signal attentiveness to someone else's cultural world. It is not simply knowledge about another culture in the abstract, but an awareness of what matters symbolically in interpersonal interaction. Elsewhere in the Transnational material, participants also stressed curiosity about food, language, and ways of life, as well as the need to avoid generalising from one person to an entire group.



Taken together, the Transnational context foregrounds intercultural awareness as sensitivity to complexity, relational recognition, and the need to approach different cultural settings without assuming that one's own norms are standard.

The six contexts show that intercultural and contextual awareness in COIL exchange was grounded in lived experience rather than abstract cultural knowledge. Students became more aware that what counts as normal in one context, whether around time, hierarchy, participation, communication, or professional practice, cannot be assumed elsewhere. In some settings, this awareness was closely connected to disciplinary and professional environments; in others, it emerged through contrasting participation norms, working styles, or the limitations of interaction itself. Across all six contexts, intercultural awareness therefore involved more than simply noticing differences. It meant recognising that one's own assumptions are contextually shaped and that effective collaboration requires attention to how others understand, organise, and enact participation in shared work.

From a career-relevant intercultural development perspective, this is especially important because contemporary professional environments increasingly require people to navigate not only cultural diversity in general, but also context-specific differences in how collaboration and communication are understood.

5.2 Theme 2: Negotiating Communication Norms and Expressive Participation in COIL Exchange

Across the six contexts, participants repeatedly described communication as central to whether collaboration became meaningful, difficult, supportive, or frustrating. What emerges from their stories is that communication in COIL exchange was not merely a channel for collaboration. Rather, communication itself became a key site of learning. Participants described becoming more aware of differences in directness, pacing, responsiveness, confidence, and expectations for participation, and many reflected on how these differences affected inclusion, teamwork, and mutual understanding. As shown in Table 4, communication and relational interaction appeared across all contexts but with different emphases: in CU, it was linked to active listening, inclusive explanation, and communication accountability; in Group 2, it was shaped by limited interaction, quietness, and the need to adapt communication in order to complete the task; in Group 5, it was often framed through responsiveness, openness, and interactional ease or difficulty within teamwork; in Group 6, it was especially visible through hesitation, opinion sharing, and contrasting norms around direct expression; in UFS, it involved negotiating linguistic and cultural communication barriers with different international partners; and in the Transnational context, it centred on dialogue across linguistic and cultural difference. Across the cases, communication emerges not merely as a tool for getting work done, but as a relational practice through which students learned how to work with others whose norms, expectations, and ways of participating differed from their own.

In the CU case, participants frequently framed communication as something that must be actively adapted when working across different cultures, disciplines, and expectations. DS, for example, explicitly described communication not as a fixed trait but as something that needed to be recalibrated in response to others' working habits:

“I learned to adjust my communication style and expectations to work effectively with people who have different working habits...”
DS, CU

This account is important because it shows that communication learning in COIL was not understood simply as “speaking more clearly,” but as a situated response to difference. DS's wording suggests that communication became a form of relational and cognitive adjustment: an awareness that shared tasks do not imply shared assumptions about pace, priority, or collaboration. Similarly, VA connected communicative awareness directly to future professional life, particularly in relation to human resource management:

“Back then in Nigeria, the way we communicate is different. Coming here and then doing COIL, I started to understand that people like to do things differently, and you have to be aware of that, especially if you want to work with them.”
VA, CU

Here, communication is framed as culturally situated and professionally consequential. The learning described is not merely descriptive awareness of difference, but an emerging understanding that future work requires reflexive communication across diverse expectations. In terms of the OECD Learning Compass framework (OECD, 2019), this illustrates the integration of contextual knowledge with an attitude of openness and a skill of adaptive communication, precisely the combination the framework identifies as foundational to navigating an interconnected world.

The CU data also foregrounded listening as a particularly important communicative practice. Rather than treating communication as self-expression alone, several participants presented listening as central to effective and ethical collaboration. SM's reflection was especially powerful because it emerged through the story circle itself:

“At the beginning, I realised that I did not listen to each other properly. And that’s not considerate enough. Because talking without listening is of no use. You don’t gain anything from it, and the other person might feel like what they’re saying is useless.”

SM, CU

Her account shows that communication is both an epistemic and an ethical practice. Listening is not only a technical skill but also a form of recognition. What becomes visible here is not just a communication preference, but a value orientation: that participation requires making others feel heard and worthwhile. This strongly supports the emphasis on inclusion, care, and accountability already visible in the CU findings.

In THUAS Group 2, communication and relational interaction appeared in a more constrained form. The collaboration with Japanese counterparts involved limited interaction, and participants described communication as sometimes minimal or difficult. QU, for example, reflected on the quietness of the Japanese students:

“The Japanese students were a bit more quiet, which makes it difficult to communicate...”

QU, Group 2

This suggests that communication difficulties were not only technical but relational and interactional. Quietness affected the ease with which students could build shared understanding, ask questions, or develop a sense of collaboration. TE makes a similar point when reflecting on the limited time available for relationship-building:

“For me, it's kind of the same. I feel like we didn't have enough time to really bond with the Japanese students. It was sometimes a little bit quiet during the online COIL. But in the end, it worked out, and we made a great video.”

TE, Group 2

Group 2 therefore shows communication as both a limitation and a site of adaptation. Although students experienced limited bonding and quieter interaction, they still found a way to complete the shared task. This case is useful because it shows that successful task completion does not necessarily mean that communication was rich or relationally deep. Rather, students had to adapt to a collaboration dynamic in which communication was more limited than expected.

In Group 5, communication norms were most often articulated through collaboration structures, especially regarding punctuality, responsiveness, openness, and group motivation. Communication here was less about explicit intercultural dialogue and more about what makes collaboration work or fail. As already mentioned in Theme 1, CR, reflecting on a COIL experience with Mexican peers, described a strong contrast in expectations around punctuality and the meaning of agreed time. Yet later, CR also described adaptation rather than simple frustration:

“At the end of the story we discussed it, and then we know for the future that the next appointment... okay, let’s wait 15 minutes, 20 minutes, and then let’s first react on WhatsApp...”

CR, Group 5

This demonstrates how learning occurred through the repair and renegotiation of expectations. IS's comparison between Mexican and Swiss groups is especially useful here:

“For me, the Mexican group was just a really nice group to collaborate with, also with the Dutch students and Mexican students combined. So, we had nice conversations, but with Switzerland, it was hard to collaborate. We also weren’t as friendly with each other. Not that it was terrible or something, but just less open and less social.”

IS, Group 5

IS frames communication not as a neutral interaction but as one shaped by openness, friendliness, and conversational ease. What distinguishes the more positive experience is not simply technical success but the presence of warmer, more responsive social interaction. Communication, in this sense, was inseparable from motivation and relational openness. This framing is important because it shifts communication away from a purely individual skill and toward a relational climate. In Group 5, participants repeatedly implied that communication works best where there is shared commitment, openness, and mutual responsiveness.

In Group 6, communication and relational interaction were especially evident in contrasting norms regarding directness, hesitation, and the expression of opinion. Participants repeatedly reflected on the difference between Dutch communicative norms, which they often described as fast, direct, and opinion-forward, and their own more hesitant or atmosphere-sensitive style, already discussed in Theme 1. AA’s emphasis on “reading the room” suggests an interactional norm based on sensitivity to the atmosphere, whereas Dutch peers were perceived as more willing to start and assert themselves. Communication here is therefore learned through contrast between different norms of initiation and expression. However, AA also described change over time:

“I feel like I really need to... express more like, my feelings. And I don’t have to read the room... I think I would like to participate more from that experience.”

AA, Group 6

Likewise, KY reflected on the contrast between educational expectations around having an opinion:

“The Dutch students have their own opinion first... and what I learned is everyone should have their own opinion and reason when someone is talking, and we should do something.” KY, Group 6

KY’s account shows participants connecting communication with agency, reasoning, and participation in discussion; such qualities are highly relevant to future academic and professional settings. AR provides a related but distinct perspective when reflecting on explicitness in communication:

“One of the students asked everyone to participate and join making the video. So I felt the difference between Japanese and the students... the communication style. They can ask strictly, but I can’t say it because I care much about it.” R, Group 6

AR’s narrative shows that communication norms are not only about confidence, but also about what kinds of requests feel legitimate. AR admires the directness of asking everyone to participate yet also describes herself as unable to speak that way because she is concerned about how it may affect others. Communication in Group 6, therefore, emerges as a site where participants encountered different assumptions about directness, leadership, and interpersonal care. At the same time, several participants reflected positively on learning to have and express opinions more actively. This tension between sensitivity and expression is central to what makes Group 6 distinctive within Theme 2. Group 6, therefore, makes especially visible how COIL VE can support the development of expressive participation and confidence, not by erasing relational sensitivity, but by enabling participants to renegotiate how and when they speak.

In the UFS case, communication and relational interaction were shaped by the need to negotiate linguistic and cultural barriers across two different international partnerships, with Russian and American counterparts. The available material suggests that communication with American students was experienced as more straightforward, while interaction with Russian students required greater adaptation. MM's reflection captures this clearly:

"I remembered Teams was translating things that we did not even say, and language was a very obvious thing because at some point you can just speak English like we usually do in South Africa, so I learned to go to Google, and I actually learned to start saying certain things obviously like greetings and common words to break the ice and have the conversation going which accelerated the speed at which tasks could then be done."
MM, UFS

This account shows communication as a practical and relational process of adjustment. MM describes not only a technological barrier, where Teams produced inaccurate translations, but also an interpersonal response: learning greetings and common words in order to break the ice and make collaboration easier. This suggests that communication learning in UFS involved more than overcoming language problems. It required students to find relational strategies, such as learning greetings, breaking the ice, and establishing a warmer basis for exchange, that could unlock task progress. This mirrors what Group 5 participants described as the conditions for communication to work: not technical fluency alone, but a relational climate of openness and mutual responsiveness. In this sense, the UFS case contributes an important language-focused dimension to Theme 2, showing how participants negotiated communication barriers by adapting both linguistically and interpersonally.



A related but somewhat different pattern emerged in the Transnational context, where participants often described communication across differences in explicitly intercultural terms. JA reflected on the need to modify his own speech pace in response to others' linguistic needs:

"I speak too fast, and because of that, the language barrier is a bit more difficult for other students, especially if English is not their first language... I could misunderstand people, or they could misunderstand me... It would cause friction... I've had to learn to pace myself and make sure everybody follows along."

JA, Transnational

His account illustrates a form of communicative self-regulation that goes beyond awareness into adjustment. JA identifies a personal habit, recognises its consequences for others, and describes deliberately changing his behaviour in order to sustain mutual understanding. The mechanism here is not only norm contrast but also reflexive adaptation. Communication becomes a practice of inclusion, requiring attention to the pace, accessibility, and consequences of one's own speech.

DB's account adds another dimension by highlighting that communication cannot be understood solely from what is spoken. She described how some students responded mainly with nods or minimal gestures rather than with spoken contributions. In her experience, silence itself became communicatively meaningful:

“Our students were completely silent during the whole of the COIL project because they just don’t know maybe English well... when we were asking some questions... they just nodded... sometimes, waving, etc.”

DB, Transnational

What matters here is that this led participants to rethink what communication looks like in intercultural settings and reveals the importance of interpretive generosity. Rather than reading silence as disengagement, DB began to interpret minimal responses as participation shaped by language confidence. This is a subtle but important learning shift. It suggests that effective communication across differences includes recognising constrained forms of response and resisting simplistic judgements about motivation or ability. Together, these accounts show that communication learning in transnational COIL involved not just speaking and listening but learning how to interpret behaviour ethically and cautiously in intercultural settings.

The six contexts show that communication in COIL exchange was not simply a background condition for collaboration, but a central site of learning in its own right. Participants became more aware of how communication is shaped by listening, pacing, openness, responsiveness, language confidence, and different expectations about when and how to speak. In some cases, this involved learning to listen more carefully or adapt one's pace and directness; in others, it meant recognising that silence, hesitation, or minimal response might require interpretation rather than judgement. In still others, it meant finding

relational strategies, such as a greeting in another language, a warmer opening, or a deliberate adjustment of tempo, that created the conditions for collaboration to become possible. Across all settings, communication was learned as a relational practice rather than a neutral exchange of information. From a Coiling Careers perspective, this is particularly significant because contemporary professional environments increasingly require people not only to communicate across differences, but to do so in ways that enable understanding, inclusion, and collaborative trust.

5.3 Theme 3: Collaboration Structures and Coordination in COIL Exchange

Across the six contexts, participants repeatedly described the organisational aspect of collaboration as central to their learning experience. While COIL exchange is often framed primarily in terms of intercultural dialogue, participants' stories reveal that the practical work of coordinating collaboration across distance, time zones, varying levels of participation, and digital environments was equally formative. These experiences often involved negotiating meeting times, distributing responsibilities, managing uneven engagement, and adapting to asynchronous communication. As reflected in Table 4, coordination challenges appeared in all cases, though with different emphases: as professional teamwork skills in CU, as limited interaction and task alignment in Group 2, as punctuality and responsibility in Group 5, as asynchronous digital workflow in Group 6, as patience and accommodation in UFS, and as global coordination in transnational collaborations. These experiences illustrate how participants developed a set of competencies increasingly relevant to contemporary professional contexts.

In the CU case, coordination challenges were most often framed as professional teamwork competencies that students expected to transfer into future work environments. Coordinating across time zones is consistently identified as one of the primary structural challenges of global teamwork in higher education (Flammia et al., 2016), and DS's account makes this concrete. She described how collaboration across three regions required deliberate scheduling and collective adjustment:

“We had people from the US, the UK and Dubai, so obviously time zones were a big thing... America's like six hours behind us. Then Dubai was six hours ahead of me. So we all had to kind of make a way for us to meet somewhere in the middle... I remember having to do meetings sometimes at like 9:00 PM.”
DS, CU

What initially appears to be a logistical issue becomes an important learning experience in shared responsibility and coordination within distributed teams. DS emphasised that scheduling meetings across three regions required compromise and planning rather than assuming that collaboration would occur automatically. She later described how managing these constraints helped her develop practical organisational skills:

“I did also get better at coordinating schedules and meeting deadlines across different time zones.”
DS, CU

These reflections demonstrate how coordination challenges simultaneously supported the development of practical and cognitive skills. Managing schedules required anticipating others' availability, communicating expectations clearly, and maintaining a shared commitment to project progress. In this sense, the organisational side of collaboration becomes a site of learning about professional teamwork rather than simply a background condition for completing tasks.

MP's account at CU highlights a different dimension of coordination learning: navigating breakdowns in collaboration. Rather than describing smooth teamwork, she emphasised repeated group changes and uneven participation during the project:

“I had to have a group changed a couple of times because I was working with South African students, and some of them wouldn't care to answer, some of them just didn't want to answer the call.”
MP, CU

Although this experience could easily be interpreted as a failure, PM framed it as a learning process about persistence and adaptability in group work. It is worth noting that disengagement of this kind may reflect conditions on the partner side, workload pressures, technical access, or institutional support, rather than unwillingness alone. PM's reflections suggest that collaboration across distance often involves navigating uncertainty and uneven participation rather than idealised conditions of teamwork, helping students develop resilience and problem-solving approaches that are highly relevant to future professional environments.

In Group 2, collaboration and coordination were shaped by the need to align internally as a group while also coordinating with Japanese counterparts whose approach to the task appeared to differ. The available material suggests that Group 2 students worked closely within their own group, but that the collaboration with Japanese students was more segmented, with each side producing material that was later combined. This created a form of coordination based less on continuous co-development and more on aligning separately produced contributions into a shared final product. TE's account captures this clearly:

“I agree. The moment I liked more was when we were filming, also because we had a lot of fun.... Putting all the scenes together and the transitions, I felt a little bit like a YouTuber. When the Japanese students sent us the videos, they were a little bit different than ours because we took all the videos together, but the Japanese did the videos by themselves. You could clearly see the differences, like the changing of locations and the tone. But I feel sorry as well that we couldn't be together.”
TE, Group 2

This reflection is useful because it shows both successful coordination and the limits of that coordination. On one hand, the students were able to assemble a final video from different contributions. On the other hand, TE's comment that ***“the Japanese did the videos by themselves”*** and that she felt sorry they “couldn't be together” suggests that the collaboration did not fully operate as a shared production process. Group 2 therefore adds an important contrast to the other cases: coordination was achieved, but through parallel work and later integration rather than sustained joint collaboration. This still required planning, initiative, and the ability to anticipate how separately produced work could be combined, but it also reveals how COIL coordination can remain partial when interaction is limited.

In Group 5, coordination challenges were framed less as intercultural dialogue in itself and more as the practical work of sustaining collaboration when expectations, motivation, and participation were uneven. As discussed earlier, differences in punctuality and responsiveness were part of these experiences, with some participants noting that their international peers treated meeting times more flexibly than they were accustomed to. In response, students described adjusting not only their expectations but also their coordination practices, for example, by allowing a longer waiting period and using WhatsApp as a follow-up mechanism when participants did not join on time.

CE's account suggests that this was not an isolated incident, as she similarly recalled waiting for extended periods for scheduled meetings to begin:

“We were also waiting for hours... we had like a meeting scheduled on this day and this time, and after two hours they still didn't come to the Zoom meeting.”
CE, Group 5

However, participants' reflections suggest that the more substantive issue extended beyond time itself to the difficulty of maintaining shared commitment and accountability within the group. IS, for example, emphasised that collaboration depended heavily on whether participants shared a similar level of motivation and willingness to engage:

“If you have a nice group who wants to work or they're in the same mentality, then you can be more open, be more friendly, and then the experience gets better because you have more discussions, because you have a better outcome.”
IS, Group 5

Similarly, CE linked effective collaboration to clearly agreed expectations and consistent participation:

“We agreed with each other on time. And everyone was on time for deadlines. Everyone participated. So, I think the collaboration went well.”
CE, Group 5

These accounts indicate that Group 5 participants came to understand coordination not simply as scheduling interactions, but as creating and maintaining the conditions necessary for collaboration through responsiveness, shared responsibility, and mutual commitment. In this sense, the Group 5 data foreground the structural dimensions of teamwork, where communication, participation, and organisation are closely interconnected.

In Group 6, coordination challenges were primarily shaped by asynchronous digital communication and time-zone differences between Japan and the Netherlands. Participants described having limited overlap in their active hours, which meant that collaboration could not consistently rely on synchronous meetings. AA explained that the group relied heavily on chat communication because participants were active at different times of day:

“When we are doing [something in the chat], they are sleeping, and when we sleep, they are doing something. The chat is working like 24 hours.”

AA, Group 6

This description illustrates how digital communication platforms enabled continuous collaboration despite geographical distance. In this sense, the chat functioned not merely as a communication tool, but as the main infrastructure through which participation, continuity, and task progress were sustained. Howard et al., (2023) similarly document how asynchronous digital workflows enabled student collaboration to continue across significant time-zone differences, with participants learning to sustain shared progress through rolling contributions rather than synchronous co-presence. Instead of relying exclusively on synchronous meetings, participants in Group 6 developed a workflow in which tasks progressed gradually through asynchronous contributions. KY interpreted this dynamic positively, describing how time differences could even increase productivity:

“You can work eight hours in your time; I can work eight hours in my time... so you can work 24 hours in total.”

KY, Group 6

At the same time, Group 6 participants also made clear that this form of coordination was not frictionless. AR described collaboration on Zoom and online systems as difficult, noting communication shortages and the challenge of ensuring that everyone participated in making the video.



This suggests that coordination was not simply about managing time difference, but also about sustaining shared engagement in distributed tasks. Taken together, these accounts show that Group 6 participants learned to coordinate work through a rolling digital workflow, adapting to different working patterns while also negotiating participation, responsibility, and continuity in online collaboration.

In the UFS case, collaboration and coordination were shaped by the need to work across different cultural expectations, communication barriers, and time zones. The available material suggests that participants learned to accommodate different ways of working by meeting others halfway, slowing down, and allowing space for others to explain their needs before moving forward. NO's reflection highlights the importance of perspective-taking and compromise:

“Yes, as I say what I've learned is that you can look at a problem from different perspectives and even meet one another halfway it's despite the cultural differences and communication differences and to work actually together and that was for me very very interesting...”

NO, UFS

This account shows coordination as a process of accommodation. Rather than assuming that collaboration depends on everyone working in the same way, NO frames successful teamwork as the ability to recognise different perspectives and still find a shared way forward. ZV's account develops this further by showing how coordination also required patience, especially when language barriers affected the pace of interaction:

“I am not a very patient person, and I actually learned to be more patient because with the Russians they were a greater language barrier like Violet explained earlier so um and I have to learn to to keep quiet and wait for them to first explain what they need and not jump in and just give my ideas...”

ZV, UFS

ZV's reflection is analytically useful because it connects coordination with self-regulation. The challenge was not only organising tasks, but also managing one's own impulse to move quickly, speak first, or impose ideas before others had been able to contribute. This aligns with Medina and Hestler's (2021) observation that the practical difficulties of cross-cultural COIL, when approached reflectively, function as catalysts for deeper learning rather than obstacles to it. In this sense, the UFS case adds an important relational dimension to coordination: collaboration depended on patience, accommodation, and the ability to adjust one's own pace to enable others' participation.

In the Transnational context, coordination challenges were often framed as global teamwork practices involving role flexibility, empathy, and shared responsibility. JA described how students adapted when some participants were unable to attend meetings or complete tasks:

“If there was a negative experience... someone couldn't make a class, couldn't do a certain task... it wouldn't be shunned or frowned upon. We'd understand that everybody has personal matters... And the way we took those roles, when someone couldn't participate... someone else picked up the helm and completed the work.”

JA, Transnational

This account illustrates how coordination was sustained through collective responsibility rather than strict task division. Participants redistributed roles to maintain project progress, demonstrating flexibility and mutual support within the team. Such practices reflect the kind of adaptive role flexibility characteristic of project-based and distributed professional environments, where responsibilities shift in response to availability and constraint rather than following fixed divisions, precisely the kind of professional capability that contemporary workplaces increasingly require (Flammia et al., 2016).

Time-zone coordination was also explicitly linked to empathy and commitment in the transnational data. MS highlighted how participation across geographical distance required personal adjustments:

“One of the things that's highlighted for me is the empathy... empathy in showing up... the empathy for sacrificing their time zones.”

MS, Transnational

MS's account reveals that coordination challenges were not experienced only as technical or logistical issues. Instead, participants interpreted the willingness to attend meetings at inconvenient times as evidence of dedication and care for the group. In this sense, coordination practices also reinforced ethical values such as responsibility and respect for others' contributions.

The six contexts demonstrate that coordination challenges were not peripheral to the COIL experience but formed a central component of participants' learning. Students encountered a range of practical constraints, including time zone differences, uneven participation, limitations of digital communication, language barriers, parallel workflows, and contrasting expectations regarding punctuality and responsibility. Rather than preventing collaboration, these constraints became opportunities to develop strategies such as adjusting meeting expectations, redistributing responsibilities, and using asynchronous communication tools to sustain shared progress, combining separately produced work, waiting for others to contribute, and negotiating shared norms of participation. From a Coiling Careers perspective, these experiences are particularly significant because they reflect the realities of contemporary professional collaboration. By navigating these challenges, participants developed practical competencies in digital collaboration, task coordination, patience, accommodation, and adaptive teamwork, highlighting coordination as a key pathway for developing career-relevant capabilities in COIL exchange.

5.4 Theme 4: Reflexivity and Learning-to-Learn in COIL Exchange

A further cross-case pattern concerns reflexivity and learning to learn. Across the six contexts, participants frequently described moments when their own assumptions, behaviours, and participation patterns became visible through interactions with others. Rather than learning only about external differences, students repeatedly reflected on their own communication habits, expectations, and interpretations of others' actions. These reflections often emerged during the story circle conversations themselves, where participants revisited earlier experiences and reconsidered how they had understood them at the time. Reflexivity of this kind is understood as the capacity to monitor one's own assumptions,

adjust behaviour in response to experience, and develop more nuanced self-awareness through interaction, which is widely recognised as a core dimension of intercultural competence development (Liddicoat, 2019; Peng & Dervin, 2023). As shown in Table 4, reflexivity appeared across all contexts but with different emphases: in CU, it was linked to communication accountability, self-regulation, and professional development; in Group 2, it appeared through retrospective recognition of how bonding, task completion, and uneven circumstances shaped the COIL experience; in Group 5, it focused on reassessing collaboration conditions, participation expectations, and personal communicative confidence; in Group 6, it appeared through growing self-awareness about hesitation, confidence, and communication norms; in UFS, it was linked to interpreting others carefully and connecting COIL experiences to participants' own educational and social contexts; and in the Transnational context, it centred on questioning assumptions, stereotypes, and one's own cultural positioning. Across these accounts, reflexivity functioned as a key mechanism through which experience was translated into future-oriented learning.

In the CU case, reflexivity was frequently expressed through explicit self-evaluation of one's own communicative behaviour and working needs. MS provided one of the clearest examples when reflecting on how he presents himself in collaborative and professional settings:

“I also realised I take too much time explaining sometimes, and I need to be more organised so people can see that I actually know what I'm talking about.”

MS, CU

MS's account is a strong example of metacognitive self-regulation. MS identifies a recurring pattern in his own way of speaking, evaluates its impact on clarity and efficiency, and links that realisation directly to future professional settings.

This form of communicative self-monitoring, where students identify a habitual pattern, assess its consequences for others, and articulate an intention to change, is consistent with what Liddicoat (2019) describes as critical intercultural reflection: not simply noticing difference, but using encounter to interrogate one's own assumptions and practices. Reflexivity in the CU case, therefore, involves more than awareness of difference; it includes the capacity to monitor one's own communicative style and to recognise what might need to change in order to function effectively in diverse academic and workplace environments.

A different but equally important form of reflexivity appears in MP's account, which foregrounds the role of cognitive difference and self-knowledge in collaboration:

“Obviously, I'm a bit dyslexic, so I struggle a bit...they want like here, here, here, right here. I'm like, can you give me a second?”

MP, CU

This reflection is significant because it extends reflexivity beyond intercultural adjustment alone and toward awareness of one's own learning pace and processing needs. PM's narrative reveals how collaborative work made her more conscious not only of external expectations but also of the conditions under which she herself can participate effectively. Rather than framing this as a deficit, her account implicitly foregrounds the importance of pacing, processing space, and inclusive collaboration. This dimension of reflexivity, i.e., becoming aware of one's own cognitive and participatory conditions, is not typically foregrounded in intercultural competence frameworks, which tend to focus on cultural rather than individual differences. It represents a study contribution: reflexivity in COIL can encompass awareness of neurodivergent and individual processing, not only intercultural self-monitoring.

In Group 2, reflexivity emerged through participants' retrospective recognition that, despite limited time and less sustained interaction with Japanese counterparts, meaningful learning still emerged from completing the COIL task. TE, for example, reflected on the differences in the Japanese students' video contributions while also recognising that the final outcome was still achieved:

“The videos from Japanese students were a little different. Also, I think one girl was sick, so maybe that also had some influence. But it worked out in the end.”

TE, Group 2

This is a modest but important form of reflexivity. TE does not simply describe the videos as different; she also considers a possible contextual reason for the difference and frames the outcome as something that was ultimately resolved. Reflexivity here involves interpreting the experience with caution rather than reducing the difference to a simple judgement about the other group. EV's account adds another dimension by identifying bonding as a meaningful outcome of the task:

“I agree. Especially that it was really nice to work together because we could make a bond when we were doing the video. I also really liked the moment of bonding together.”

EV, Group 2

Together, these reflections suggest that Group 2 participants were able to extract learning from a COIL experience that was not necessarily ideal or deeply integrated. Their reflexivity lies in recognising that learning emerged through the process of coordinating, organising, and completing the task despite limits in interaction. The available evidence supports a claim about retrospective meaning-making and task-based bonding, though the depth of reflexive gain in this case is more limited than in other contexts.

In Group 5, reflexivity often manifested as participants becoming more aware of their own communicative limitations, expectations, and developmental needs in collaborative settings. CE's account is especially useful because it makes visible the internal work involved in participation, specifically in speaking English:

“When it comes to talking more, I have to think about the words first, and then I have to speak it out loud, and then I have an accent, and then, yeah, there's too much I think about.”

CE, Group 5

CE's reflection foregrounds reflexivity at the level of self-monitoring. She is highly aware of the cognitive and emotional processes involved in speaking English in collaborative settings: searching for words, managing accent awareness, and coping with overthinking. The learning here is not only linguistic; it is also reflexive, because she becomes more conscious of what makes participation harder for her. CE's account is consistent with this: her self-monitoring became visible and articulable through the story circle conversation, suggesting that the dialogic method contributed to the reflexivity it was documenting.

MD offers a complementary reflection, also focused on linguistic and educational self-awareness:

“In the beginning, I was very nervous...I didn't learn so much English at school. It was more from Netflix or something else. So the first time it was very difficult, I think.”

MD, Group 5

MD situates his discomfort in relation to his own educational history, which allows him to interpret the difficulty as something understandable and transitional rather than fixed. In Group 5, then, reflexivity often takes the form of recognising one's own starting point, confidence level, and conditions for participation, while also reassessing what kinds of group structures and expectations make collaboration work.



In Group 6, reflexivity was especially strong and often highly self-conscious. Participants repeatedly reflected on their hesitation, the effort required to speak up, and the need to rethink familiar communication habits. AA described a clear developmental shift over the course of the COIL experience:

“At the first class, when we started the COIL class, I was like 'oh, what should I do? How can I start and how can I express my feelings or what everyone thinks about me?' But now I feel more comfortable and I feel I have more confidence in expressing.”

AA, Group 6

AA's account is particularly valuable because it makes change over time explicit. AA contrasts an earlier state of uncertainty with a later state of confidence, thereby narrating learning as transformation rather than simple acquisition. This temporal dimension of reflexivity, in which participants describe a before-and-after in their own participation, is a contribution of the study. Existing accounts of COIL reflexivity tend to capture snapshots rather than arcs; AA's account shows that within a single exchange participants can experience and articulate a developmental trajectory.

AR provides a complementary reflection that centres on cognitive processing and speech organisation:

"I thought that Dutch students think fast. They can think fast. I need time to think deeply and organise what I'm going to say."

AR, Group 6

This reflection combines intercultural comparison with self-knowledge. AR notices a difference in communicative tempo, but the most important insight is not simply that others are faster. Rather, she uses that contrast to understand her own process more clearly: she needs time, organisation, and reflection before speaking. This is a strong example of learning to learn in Liddicoat's (2019) sense: the participant becomes more aware of how she thinks and what conditions support her participation, and that awareness itself becomes a resource for future interaction.

In the UFS case, reflexivity appeared strongly in participants' reflections on the lessons learned from COIL and their application to everyday educational and professional contexts. ZV's reflection is particularly significant because it shows how listening to another participant's story prompted her to connect the COIL experience with her own social and educational positioning:

"Now I have to think about what PM said and she spoke about because she didn't want to offend the Russians with interpreting their language wrongly and I think that's something that as a young black South African in our education space you come across often because people misinterpret your communications or they don't earlier so that's why you were so aware of or you took notice of not interpreting people wrongly because it resonates with your own experience, maybe."

ZV, UFS

This account shows reflexivity operating through the story circle itself. ZV does not only describe her own COIL experience; she reflects on another participant's account and interprets it through her own experience of being misinterpreted in South African educational spaces. Peng and Dervin (2023) argue precisely that this kind of intersubjective reflexivity, where one person's story triggers recognition and reinterpretation in another, is distinctively productive and cannot be replicated through individual written reflection alone. The UFS case, therefore, adds a distinctive dimension to Theme 4: reflexivity as relational and socially positioned, where participants become more attentive to how misinterpretation, offence, and social identity shape communication across difference.

In the Transnational context, reflexivity often took the form of self-repositioning in relation to cultural and professional norms. JA's reflection on hierarchy, discussed earlier in Theme 1, shows reflexivity as more than awareness of external difference. He recognises that his own preferred way of communicating is culturally situated and that effective interaction requires him to reflect on the limits of his own assumptions. Reflexivity here is relational and positional: learning occurs not just by observing others, but by recognising oneself as part of the intercultural dynamic.

MS provides a related but distinct example through his reflection on communication clarity and its role in professional practice:

"The way we normally speak is not actually understood by everybody... professional communication is when your perspective is actually expressed in the words... If I just choose to speak differently, slowly and more elaborately... that would present a better narrative"

MS, Transnational

MS identifies a gap between habitual communication and effective communication, then describes how he might adapt his own practice in response. This is communicative self-regulation in the sense described by Liddicoat (2019): the participant does not simply observe misunderstanding but uses it to rethink how he should communicate in future academic and workplace settings. As already observed in earlier themes, other participants in the Transnational context also questioned generalisations about cultural groups; what these accounts add is reflexivity understood as self-modification, not only perspective-taking.

The six contexts show that reflexivity in COIL exchange was not incidental but central to participants' learning. Students became more aware of how they communicate, process information, participate, interpret others, and understand the conditions under which they collaborate most effectively. In some cases, this involved recognising one's own communicative habits; in others, it involved identifying assumptions related to hierarchy, educational pace, language competence, or the risk of misinterpreting others. What this study adds to existing accounts of reflexivity in COIL exchange is a set of more specific forms: temporal reflexivity (AA's before-and-after account), socially positioned reflexivity (ZV's connection between intercultural interpretation and racial identity in South African education), and neurodivergent processing awareness (MP's account of pacing and cognitive difference). Across all settings, reflexivity functioned as a bridge between experience and future action: participants not only described what they had learned, but also how that learning might shape what they would do differently in future contexts. From a Coiling Careers perspective, this is particularly significant, as contemporary professional environments increasingly require individuals who can monitor their own assumptions, adapt their behaviour, and continue learning through interaction rather than relying on fixed expectations or routines.

5.5 Theme 5: Ethical Orientation in Collaborative Work

Across the six contexts, participants articulated or implicitly enacted ethical orientations that shaped their approach to collaborating with others. These included fairness, inclusion, patience, responsibility, mutual support, accommodation, and respect for difference. Importantly, these orientations were not presented simply as abstract ideals or personal virtues detached from practice. Rather, they became visible through the ways participants described what good collaboration should look like, how people ought to respond to one another, and what kinds of behaviours made participation possible or difficult. Golubeva and Guntersdorfer (2020) argue that relational empathy, i.e., the capacity to attend to and care about others' experiences in intercultural interaction, is not a by-product of collaboration but an active enabler of it; the present findings extend this by showing that students themselves identified and articulated empathy, care, and accommodation as normative dimensions of what good collaboration requires. As reflected in Table 4, ethical orientation appeared across the cases but with different emphases: in CU, it was linked strongly to inclusion, consideration, and accommodation; in Group 2, it appeared through efforts to create a workable joint product despite limited preparation, time-zone constraints, and uneven interaction; in Group 5, it became visible through normative expectations of shared responsibility, mutual support, and relational connection; in Group 6, it emerged through care for others' participation, respect for interactional sensitivity, and the creation of conditions in which people felt able to contribute; in UFS, it centred on accommodation, understanding, and listening across difference; and in the Transnational context, it centred on empathy, support, and non-judgement.

In the CU case, ethical orientation was often framed through inclusion and accommodation in collaborative work. SM offered one of the strongest examples when reflecting on the importance of being considerate in diverse learning environments:

“People are from different cultural backgrounds, and they have different upbringings and different learning methodologies, and they would not be able to understand where we come from or how we are speaking sometimes... We are different beings, and we perceive the same things differently... So, always leave room for mistakes... We should be considerate and try to be more inclusive...”

SM, CU

SM's account presents ethical collaboration as a matter of ongoing interpretive generosity. She does not describe inclusion as a formal principle alone, but as a practical stance of leaving room for misunderstanding, difference, and error. What emerges here is a value orientation rooted in humility and relational care: rather than assuming that communication should be smooth or immediate, SM frames collaboration as requiring patience and consideration, particularly when students are negotiating unfamiliar academic and social contexts.

This ethical dimension is reinforced in MS's reflection on what he would carry into future work:

“If I know that I have somebody who follows some religion, then I would know that if there's any holiday coming up... if I know that I have a person with additional abilities, I'd try and make the communication more accessible for them as well, just to make them feel inclusive... If I know I have somebody who's from a different country and they're not very vocal... I try to speak slowly. I just try to be considerate.”

MS, CU

This account explicitly extends an ethical orientation into the workplace. Inclusion is framed not only as a general attitude, but as an active practice of noticing difference and responding to it in concrete ways: MS links consideration to religion, disability, language fluency, and accessibility, recognising that ethical collaboration requires attention to multiple, intersecting forms of difference at once. This is consistent with what Gonda et al., (2024) identify as the conditions for psychologically safe participation: environments in which differences are noticed and accommodated rather than ignored. As noted in earlier themes, CU participants frequently connected communication and inclusion to future professional contexts. What becomes more visible here, however, is the ethical dimension of those accounts: collaboration is framed not only as a matter of effectiveness or adaptation, but as a practice grounded in consideration, reciprocity, and shared responsibility toward others.

In Group 2, ethical orientation was evident in participants' reflections on efforts to create a workable collaborative outcome despite limited interaction with Japanese counterparts and the practical difficulties posed by time zones, preparation, and differing approaches to production. FR's reflection captures this:

“I can agree with it. We were not discussing it that much in the group to give them a clear overview. So it was likely a bit random or quick for them as well. With the time zones, sometimes it needs a bit more preparation. But at the end, they did it very well, and we had a good output.”

FR, Group 2

This account is useful because it avoids placing responsibility for the difficulties only on the other group. FR recognises that the Japanese students may not have had a clear overview and that the process may have felt “random or quick” for them as well. Ethical orientation here appears through retrospective fairness: the participant acknowledges the constraints faced by the partner group while still valuing the final outcome. Group 2 therefore contributes a modest but important example of ethical collaboration as careful interpretation, rather than judging limited interaction only as a failure, FR's reflection suggests an attempt to understand the conditions under which others were working and to recognise their contribution to the shared product.

In Group 5, ethical orientation was less often articulated in explicit moral language, but it became visible through participants' normative expectations of what responsible and respectful collaboration should involve. IS's account is especially useful here because it highlights responsibility to the collective even when individual circumstances differ:

“Just because you were following other lessons as well but still participating in everything that we needed to do...But because of it, I think everyone took it seriously to take part and participate.”
IS, Group 5

This reflection frames participation itself as something that carries normative weight. The issue is not simply whether work gets done, but whether group members honour a shared sense of responsibility toward one another. In this sense, ethical orientation appears less as explicit moral reasoning and more through expectations that people should remain engaged and contribute seriously, even when juggling multiple demands. Kučerová (2023) identifies student motivation and engagement as central to whether COIL delivers meaningful learning; the present study adds that students themselves hold normative expectations of one another's engagement, not only as a pragmatic condition for task success but as a matter of collaborative fairness.



CR offers a related perspective when reflecting on what he felt was missing from some COIL tasks:

“Not like doing tasks but feeling the connection and maybe more. Maybe start off with some to get to know each other more instead of saying your name and the basic things.”
CR, Group 5

This critique suggests that, for Group 5 participants, good collaboration depended not only on organisation but also on a sense of relational connection. When collaboration became too task-focused, something normatively important was perceived to be lost: the sense that group members knew one another well enough to work with mutual understanding and care. Taken together, the Group 5 data suggest that ethical orientation was expressed through expectations of seriousness and reliability, and a need for a relational foundation beneath the task.

In Group 6, ethical orientation emerged through participants' concern for how others feel in interaction and whether collaborative spaces make contribution possible. KY offered a striking reflection on what he saw as a valued feature of Japanese interaction:

“Let me explain the advantage first. I think this is a really strong point for the Japanese... we can read your mind sometimes... Then we can take care of each other.”

KY, Group 6

KY's reflection is viewed here as a valued relational practice rather than a straightforward description of national culture; this perspective is analytically useful. He frames attentiveness to others' unspoken feelings as a form of care. The ethical orientation here lies in anticipatory sensitivity: the attempt to respond to others even when they do not state their needs directly. As discussed in earlier themes, Group 6 participants also recognised that such attentiveness could make direct expression more difficult - a tension between care for the group atmosphere and the need to speak and participate. This tension represents a study contribution: ethical orientation in COIL can involve not only inclusion and patience, but also an internal conflict between relational sensitivity and individual expression that existing frameworks have not specifically addressed.

AR's reflection highlights the significance of a welcoming environment for participation:

“The students were really welcoming to sharing ideas and talking more. So it was really fun to participate”

AR, Group 6

This account suggests that an ethically supportive group is not only one in which people are careful or considerate, but also one in which participants feel actively invited to contribute. Gonda et al., (2024) identify this quality - the active encouragement of participation rather than merely the absence of discouragement - as central to psychologically safe learning environments. Group 6, therefore, adds an important dimension to the cross-case analysis: ethical collaboration includes not only patience and respect, but also the creation of conditions in which participants feel able to speak without excessive self-monitoring.

In the UFS case, ethical orientation was framed most clearly through accommodation, understanding, and the willingness to listen across difference. NO's reflection is especially useful because it explicitly distinguishes between accommodation and understanding, connecting both to professional life:

“Accommodation would be for personal use and understanding would be what I use for my professional life it took a lot out of one to actually build this connection that ZV's speaks of and understand how others make meaning of the same world in the same world that I derive a different meaning from the world....”
NO, UFS

This account presents ethical collaboration as an effort to understand how others make meaning differently, even when inhabiting the same shared task environment. The emphasis is not only on tolerance but on the more demanding work of building connection and recognising different interpretive standpoints. NO develops this further by reflecting on patience and the ability to remain engaged:

“and for me to sit there she said she's impatient, I'm not impatient, I get bored quickly so this was interesting for me because there was always something to learn so understanding and the connections that you make you try and set the thing um in a work setup you think maybe Zadie forgot to say as well because so you're able to be a bit more bearing and understand.”
NO, UFS

Dense as this account is, the core insight is clear: recognising difference as an opportunity for understanding rather than an obstacle to efficiency enabled NO to remain engaged and more patient in shared work. The phrase “there was always something to learn” is especially significant in this respect. In this sense, the UFS case adds a strong ethical emphasis on accommodation as a practical and professional capacity: being able to work with others requires listening for understanding, recognising different ways of making meaning, and developing what NO calls being “more bearing” – a disposition of sustained attentiveness rather than impatience.

In the Transnational context, ethical orientation was especially visible through participants' emphasis on empathy, patience, and the intentional cultivation of supportive group relations. As discussed in Theme 3, some participants interpreted acts of coordination, such as attending meetings across inconvenient time zones, not merely as logistical adjustments but as signs of commitment and care for the group. What becomes more explicit here, however, is the extent to which students framed collaboration as something that should be organised around understanding and support rather than judgement or competition. DB articulated this clearly:

“You should create a really supportive, kind atmosphere with a group... they have different cultural backgrounds...expectations...and you need to understand them...second language skill... be patient with everyone as everyone has a different experience.”

DB, Transnational

This account positions ethical collaboration not simply as responding kindly when problems arise, but as deliberately creating the conditions in which difference can be accommodated from the outset. Howard et al., (2023) document a similar orientation in their cross-continental COIL study, where successful collaboration across cultures, time zones, and languages required students and staff to actively construct inclusive and supportive

conditions rather than assuming they would emerge automatically. DB's account reflects the same principle: patience and understanding are active commitments rather than passive dispositions.

This is reinforced further by JA's reflection on what future COIL spaces should make explicit:

“If some people are shy about speaking English, let them know in advance that this is a space where they can practise their English. You're not going to be ridiculed or laughed at. You should go ahead and do so.”
JA, Transnational

JA's narrative shows an ethical orientation toward creating a safe environment for participation: not only respecting differences as they emerge, but also actively establishing a climate in which vulnerability, practice, and imperfection are accepted. Taken together, the Transnational accounts suggest that ethical orientation was grounded in the deliberate cultivation of supportive relations, in which empathy, patience, and shared responsibility were treated as necessary conditions for meaningful collaboration.

These six contexts show that ethical orientation in COIL exchange was not peripheral to learning but deeply embedded in how participants understood collaboration itself. Students repeatedly evaluated collaboration in normative terms: whether others were considerate, whether participation was shared fairly, whether group atmospheres were supportive, and whether differences were accommodated rather than judged. In some contexts, this was expressed through inclusion and accessibility; in others, through empathy, patience, seriousness of participation, attentiveness to others' feelings, or the effort to understand how others make meaning. What this study adds to existing accounts of ethics in intercultural learning is the specificity of these forms: anticipatory care as a source of tension with individual expression (Group 6); accommodation as a professional capacity, not

only a personal virtue (UFS); and the active construction of safety as an ethical prerequisite for participation (Transnational). Across all six settings, ethical orientation shaped how students defined good collaboration and, in turn, what they saw as necessary for future professional work. From a COILing Careers perspective, this is especially significant because contemporary workplaces increasingly demand not only intercultural and digital competence, but also the ethical capacity to collaborate responsibly, respectfully, and inclusively with others.

5.6 Theme 6: Language and Expressive Development

Although language and expression surfaced throughout the earlier themes as part of communication, coordination, and participation, they also warrant separate attention as a final cross-case theme. Across the six contexts, participants described language not simply as a background tool for collaboration, but as something they had to actively work with, adjust to, and develop through COIL exchange. In some cases, this involved increasing confidence in speaking English; in others, it involved becoming more aware of pacing, clarity, vocabulary, translation, or the relationship between language and participation. Research on English as a lingua franca in COIL exchange contexts has consistently shown that students develop not only linguistic competence but also communicative confidence and willingness to engage through sustained real-interaction use (Iino & Wistner, 2024; Ramachandran & Kaur, 2021); the present findings support and extend this by showing that expressive development also encompasses professional clarity, relational recognition, and the affective dimensions of linguistic choice. As reflected in Table 4, language and expressive development appeared across the cases, though with different emphases: in CU, it was tied to expressive clarity and professional communication; in Group 2, language was less strongly evidenced as a standalone theme, but

appeared indirectly through limited interaction and the difficulty of developing deeper exchange; in Group 5, it emerged through using English in practice and navigating confidence across different communicative situations; in Group 6, it was especially visible through vocabulary development and the growing capacity to express opinions in English; in UFS, it centred on translation, linguistic accommodation, and efforts to meet others halfway; and in the Transnational context, it was linked to relational recognition, inclusion, and the symbolic value of linguistic effort. What this theme adds, therefore, is a more explicit focus on how language itself became an object of learning, rather than simply a medium through which other forms of learning occurred.

In the CU case, language was not always foregrounded as a separate issue, but participants did reflect on the challenge of expressing themselves clearly and efficiently in collaborative and professional settings. MS, for example, linked this directly to his future lab-based work:

“If I am actually listening, it's not just going to help me understand a person who has a different mindset or who has a different perspective from a different culture, but also from a similar culture, because in my workforce, so many things get abbreviated. There's too much to understand and too much to say and too less words to use.”
MS, CU

MS's reflection frames expressive development not as fluency in a narrow sense, but as the ability to communicate precisely under professional pressure. He makes this even clearer when reflecting on his own communication style:

“I feel like I took too much time in relaying the information that I could have used less sentences, and I feel like what that would do in my career is provide me more efficiency in my communication”
MS, CU

Together, these extracts suggest that CU participants understood language development less as learning English in a conventional academic sense and more as developing expressive clarity, brevity, and control in professional interaction. This is consistent with what Nguyen et al., (2024) describe as metacommunicative efficiency: the ability to calibrate one's own language use to the demands of the communicative context, a dimension of professional language competence that is rarely targeted in formal language instruction, but that COIL appears to support through authentic collaborative pressure.

In Group 2, language and expressive development were less clearly evidenced as a standalone theme. The available material suggests that interaction between THUAS students and their Japanese counterparts was limited, making it difficult to draw a strong language-focused interpretation from this case alone. Rather than presenting Group 2 as a major example of expressive development, it is more accurate to treat it as a contrast case: language learning may have been present in the background of the COIL experience, but the available evidence does not provide enough detail to analyse it at the same level as the other cases. This is still analytically useful because it suggests that language development in COIL depends on the quality and depth of interaction, where interaction is limited, opportunities for expressive practice, confidence-building, and language-based relational learning are also more limited.

In Group 5, language and expressive development appeared less as formal linguistic improvement and more as the practical challenge of using English in real collaborative situations. What stands out in this context is that participants did not describe language learning in abstract terms; instead, they reflected on the effort involved in expressing themselves, the difference between understanding and speaking, and the uneven confidence they felt across different



communicative situations. In this sense, language development in Group 5 was closely tied to participation, self-presentation, and the ability to contribute in group work rather than simply to vocabulary acquisition or grammatical competence.

CE offered one of the clearest examples of this when reflecting on her experience of speaking English in COIL, as discussed in Theme 4. CE's narrative is particularly valuable because it makes visible the cognitive and affective labour involved in expressive participation, showing that speaking involves a layered process of searching for words, monitoring pronunciation, and managing self-consciousness about accent. She reinforces this by distinguishing between everyday group communication and more formal modes of expression:

“Well, for it was okay. I was nervous about the poster presentation. But with the group, it was okay”.

CE, Group 5

This distinction adds an important layer to the analysis. It suggests that expressive confidence did not develop evenly across all communicative contexts. Speaking within the group felt

manageable, but a formal presentation created a different kind of pressure. Language development in Group 5, therefore, appears not as a single linear progression, but as uneven and context dependent. Students could feel more comfortable in collaborative discussion while still experiencing anxiety in settings that demanded more public or performative forms of expression. This unevenness is consistent with Ramachandran and Kaur's (2021) finding that willingness to communicate in a second language varies significantly across contexts, interlocutors, and task types, even within the same programme.

CE also articulated clearly what COIL contributed to this process:

“Well, we're talking English in practice.”
CE, Group 5

Although simple, this statement captures the distinction between studying a language and using it in live interaction. It is a distinction that sits at the heart of communicative language teaching and that COIL appears to instantiate in ways that formal classroom settings often cannot (Iino & Wistner, 2024). MD similarly reflected on his nervousness about using English in practice, especially given his limited formal exposure to the language. What becomes more visible here is that Group 5 participants understood COIL as a space in which language was not only assessed but gradually strengthened through real use.

In Group 6, language and expressive development were especially prominent and often named directly by participants as a key outcome of the COIL experience. What distinguishes this context is that students did not describe English simply as a school subject or a general communicative tool. Instead, they framed it as something closely tied to expressing opinions, sharing feelings, and participating more actively in collaborative discussion. In this sense, language development in Group 6 was inseparable from expressive confidence: learning English meant not only knowing more words but becoming more able to

use language to enter discussion, articulate a position, and contribute to shared work. AA made this distinction especially clearly when reflecting on what she had gained from the COIL experience:

“I think the skill that I got is English, of course. Especially the English that... when I say something like when I share my opinion. I know I [studied] English a lot when I was in high school, junior high, but it was just that study was not for like sharing my opinion.”
AA, Group 6

AA's narrative is analytically significant because it distinguishes between formal language learning and expressive use, in a way that maps directly onto what Fonseca-Chacana (2023) describes as the shift from English as an academic subject to English as a communicative resource for expressing thought and perspective. AA suggests that prior English education had focused on study in a narrow sense, but not on using English to communicate feeling or perspective in live interaction. COIL, therefore, appears here not simply as an extension of language instruction but as a setting in which language becomes functional, dialogic, and personally meaningful. She develops this further when describing how she actively searched for vocabulary in order to participate in the project:

“Vocabulary about this class. Like about future AI things. And also, when I explore something, like I search it. And when I text them, like when I communicate about the movie that we are making, I searched about vocabulary that I can use.”
AA, Group 6

This reflection shows language learning as embedded within task completion and collaboration. Rather than learning vocabulary in isolation, AA describes searching for the words she needed in order to discuss AI, contribute to the group's creative work, and communicate through chat. Language development here is therefore not abstract or decontextualised; it is directly connected to participation in shared academic and digital activity. A further important aspect of Group 6 is that participants linked expressive development to changes in confidence over time, as discussed in Theme 4. AA's before-and-after account shows that what changed was not just vocabulary, but the participant's willingness to speak, initiate, and articulate herself within a collaborative setting. This is particularly important from a Coiling Careers perspective, because it suggests that language learning in COIL also supports the ability to contribute to intercultural professional environments where voice, confidence, and explanation matter.

In the UFS case, language and expressive development were most clearly visible through participants' accounts of negotiating communication with Russian counterparts, especially where translation technologies and linguistic accommodation were needed to sustain interaction. PM's reflection captures both the difficulty of translation and the interpersonal effort to meet others halfway linguistically:

"I remembered teams was translating things that we did not even say and language was an obvious thing because at some point you can just speak English like we usually do in South Africa...so I learned to go to Google, and I actually learned to start saying certain things obviously like I said, the first thing I said was 'I don't want to butcher your name; I'll say I don't want to butcher you at the language, but this is me trying to meet you halfway,' and I learned that for someone that is proud of their own heritage."

MP, UFS

This account shows language learning as both practical and ethical. On one level, MP describes a technological problem: Teams was translating inaccurately, making language a visible barrier. On another level, she describes an interpersonal response: using Google, learning words or phrases, and explicitly acknowledging the risk of mispronouncing or misusing another person's language. The phrase "this is me trying to meet you halfway" frames linguistic effort as a form of respect - a finding that resonates with the broader argument in intercultural communication literature that expressive accommodation signals care and relational investment, not only communicative efficiency (Golubeva & Guntersdorfer, 2020). In the UFS case, then, expressive development was not only about making oneself understood, but also about showing care toward others' linguistic and cultural identities.

In the Transnational context, language and expressive development were tied not only to clarity and comprehension, but also to the relational and symbolic value of linguistic effort in intercultural collaboration. As discussed in earlier themes, participants became aware that language proficiency shaped who spoke, how much they contributed, and how easily others could interpret silence or minimal response. MS highlighted the importance of creating conditions in which others could express what they were actually thinking:

"I think that would be understanding what people are actually thinking and being able to provide a platform where they can be honest about what they're thinking...being able to provide a platform where they can actually be expressive...is going to be an integral aspect to getting the work done."

MS, Transnational

This reflection frames expressive participation as essential to collaboration rather than secondary to it. JA develops this further by shifting the emphasis from English as a shared working language to the relational significance of learning even small parts of others' languages:

“When I was overseas, if you learn someone's language...I think we've all heard the proverbial expression about speaking to someone in their second language, you speak to their mind, but if you speak in their home language, you speak to their heart”

JA, Transnational

He goes on to connect this directly to professional collaboration:

“Because I make an effort to try and learn their language, I'm just received more welcomingly, and we get the work done a lot more positively, and we get tasks completed on time...that's one of the ways that I would like to include those intercultural experiences into my own professional practice.”

JA, Transnational

These accounts extend the meaning of language development beyond individual fluency or confidence. In the Transnational context, language was also framed as a form of relational effort that could foster openness, trust, and more positive collaboration - a dimension of intercultural language use that Lino and Wistner (2024) associate with the affective and relational dimensions of ELF interaction, but which here is articulated not by researchers but by the participants themselves, in relation to their own professional intentions.

Taken together, the six contexts show that language and expressive development in COIL exchange were uneven but significant dimensions of learning. In some settings, this was articulated through professional clarity and communicative efficiency; in others, through enabling expression, recognising the interpersonal value of linguistic effort, practising English through real use, or using translation and linguistic accommodation to sustain interaction.

Group 2 suggests that where interaction is limited, language may remain less visible as a learning outcome; by contrast, Group 5 and Group 6 show how real-time English use can support confidence, participation, and expressive development. UFS and the Transnational context further show that language learning is not reducible to fluency or correctness alone, but can also involve respect, recognition, and the willingness to meet others halfway. What this study contributes to the existing literature is the specificity of these forms: the shift from English as a school subject to English as a resource for expressing opinion and feeling (AA, Group 6); metacommunicative efficiency as a dimension of professional language development (MS, CU); and linguistic effort as relational care rather than technical accommodation (MP, UFS; JA, Transnational). Across all six settings, language development was tied to confidence, articulation, accessibility, and the ability to be understood in intercultural interactions. From a Coiling Careers perspective, this is especially important because globally connected professional environments require not only technical language competence, but also the expressive ability to participate, explain, negotiate, and contribute meaningfully across linguistic and cultural boundaries.





6. Discussion

The discussion section is organised around four interlocking questions: what students learn (Section 6.1), how that learning is produced (Section 6.2), why context shapes what becomes visible (Section 6.3), and how communication, reflexivity, ethics, and language function as intertwined rather than separable dimensions of professional development (Section 6.4). Section 6.5 draws out the study's contributions to the COIL, employability, and global competence literature.

6.1 From intercultural exposure to career-relevant competence.

The findings of this study suggest that the value of COIL for career-relevant learning lies not simply in exposing students to cultural difference, but in requiring them to work through difference under authentic collaborative conditions. While COIL is frequently framed within internationalisation discourse as a means of promoting intercultural awareness or global citizenship (e.g. Hackett et al., 2023; Wimpenny et al., 2024; Gray & Nowak, 2026), the present findings indicate that its developmental significance extends further into the relational, communicative, and adaptive dimensions of professional practice. In OECD Learning Compass terms (OECD, 2020), these findings are best understood not merely as skill outcomes but as attitudinal and values-level shifts: students were developing a more contextually responsive professional orientation.

Literature has highlighted that COIL exchange can unsettle prior assumptions, humanise the cultural other, and generate productive cognitive dissonance (O'Dowd, 2021; Dorroll & Caballero-Garcia, 2020; Salih & Omar, 2021). Indeed, across both the survey and Story Circle phases, students consistently described situations of discomfort, in which they were required to coordinate tasks

across time zones, negotiate different communication styles and work expectations, manage uneven participation, navigate linguistic differences, and adapt to unfamiliar approaches to collaboration. Importantly, these forms of learning did not emerge primarily through abstract discussion about interculturality, but through the practical demands of completing shared tasks with others under conditions of uncertainty, asymmetry, and interdependence.

This distinction is important because it shifts the understanding of employability away from narrow skills-based framings toward a more situated and relational conception of professional competence. Communication, teamwork, leadership, adaptability, and problem-solving were among the most frequently identified employability-related outcomes in the survey phase. However, the qualitative findings demonstrate that students did not experience these capacities as isolated competencies acquired individually. Rather, they developed through interactional processes in which students were required to negotiate misunderstanding, adjust expectations, accommodate others, and reflect on their own assumptions and practices.

A further, but distinct, contribution concerns not how students' stereotypes are disrupted, but what kind of cultural knowledge replaces them once they are disrupted. The qualitative data suggest that what replaces stereotypes is not, in most cases, a more accurate cultural generalisation. It is, rather, an awareness of complexity and within-group variation. This finding resonates with Xu's (2023) concept of metacultural writing competence, which emphasises alertness to cultural complexity over cultural knowledge per se, and with Helm's (2025) observation that different COIL exchange designs position students differently in relation to the risk of cultural essentialism.

The Story Circle format was analytically important here too: through narrating experiences and hearing others respond, participants were able to articulate how disruption had become educationally meaningful rather than simply disorienting. This mechanism is less visible in studies that measure pre-post competence gains without examining how the shift from assumption to revised understanding unfolds.

Another contribution concerns what might be called triangulated comparative positioning. Several participants, particularly in the Coventry and UFS cases, described a form of intercultural learning that was not bilateral but three-way: they were simultaneously reflecting on their partner's cultural context, their own home or prior institutional context, and the new institutional context they were currently navigating. Research on international COIL exchange has shown that cross-cultural contact can increase awareness of one's own cultural positioning (Batardiere et al., 2019), but the three-way comparative dynamic visible in the present data, where participants are simultaneously inside and outside multiple institutional and cultural frames represents a more complex positioning than the bilateral contrasts typically described in the literature. This is particularly characteristic of COIL partnerships involving international students who are already navigating unfamiliar institutional environments, and it has not been foregrounded in existing COIL research.

The findings resonate with broader shifts in employability literature that increasingly emphasise relational, reflexive, and context-sensitive forms of professional readiness rather than technical competence alone (McCowan, 2014; Mbwambo & Salanga, 2023). Contemporary professional environments, particularly those shaped by digital collaboration and global interdependence, require graduates not only to possess disciplinary knowledge, but also to work productively across cultural, linguistic, technological, and organisational differences.

The present findings suggest that COIL can provide a meaningful pedagogical environment within which such capabilities may be practised and developed.

At the same time, the study complicates celebratory assumptions that intercultural or employability learning emerges automatically through international exposure, and are by default inclusive (Beelen, 2026). Students did not simply become more globally competent because they interacted with peers from another country. Rather, learning appeared to emerge through moments of difficulty, disruption, coordination, misunderstanding, negotiation, and reflection. In several cases, students explicitly described communication breakdowns, unequal participation, technological constraints, or frustration with differing work rhythms. Yet these experiences often became developmentally significant precisely because students were required to respond to them.

Leadership, for example, frequently emerged not as a predefined role but as a compensatory response to uneven collaboration. Similarly, communication was not experienced merely as the transfer of information, but as the ongoing negotiation of clarity, tone, participation, timing, and relational sensitivity across contexts. Students also described becoming more aware of their own assumptions regarding punctuality, directness, work ethic, or participation norms through interaction with peers whose expectations differed from their own. The findings therefore suggest that career-relevant competence develops not primarily through smooth collaboration, but through engagement with complexity and difference in ways that require reflexive adaptation.

This has important implications for how intercultural competence itself is conceptualised. Older models of intercultural learning have often focused on the acquisition of cultural knowledge or positive attitudes toward diversity. The present findings instead point toward a more situated and practice-oriented understanding in which intercultural competence involves the ability to communicate, collaborate, and act ethically amid uncertainty, difference, and imperfect conditions. Competence in this sense is not static knowledge about “other cultures”, but the ongoing capacity to negotiate meaning, relationships, and action across contexts (Orsini-Jones et al., 2025).

The findings also suggest that students increasingly interpreted these experiences in relation to their future professional identities. Many participants described becoming more confident about international or intercultural work, more aware of the communicative demands of professional collaboration, and more conscious of the importance of empathy, patience, flexibility, and inclusive participation. Significantly, some students also began to recognise that professional effectiveness in globally networked environments depends not only on technical expertise, but on the ability to work constructively with people whose assumptions, communicative styles, and social realities may differ substantially from their own.

From this perspective, COIL appears to function not merely as an internationalisation activity, but as a form of situated professional learning in which students rehearse many of the relational and communicative conditions increasingly characteristic of contemporary work environments. The significance of COIL therefore lies not only in connecting students across borders, but in creating structured opportunities for collaborative negotiation across difference. It is within these processes of negotiation, adaptation, and reflection that career-relevant global competence appears to develop most meaningfully.

6.2 Learning as process: how development emerged through COIL

This section addresses how that learning was produced. The distinction matters because understanding the mechanisms and conditions of COIL learning is a precondition for designing experiences that are more reliably effective. The present findings suggest a two-level account. At the first level, a core process was identifiable across all six cases: taken-for-granted norms or assumptions were brought into view through contrast or constraint, reconsidered through reflection, and translated into some form of learning or adjustment. In simplified form, the process followed a recurring sequence (see Table 5):



Figure 3: Process followed a recurring sequence

At the second level, three enabling conditions shaped whether and to what extent the core process ran: relational support, task authenticity, and reflective scaffolding. Where these conditions were present, the core process produced substantive and transferable learning; where they were absent or weak, the same encounter with difference produced frustration, superficial adjustment, or no development at all. This section elaborates on each level in turn.

Table 5: How COIL Learning is Produced: Core Process, Enabling Conditions, and Outcome Dimensions Across Six Cases

Category	Dimension	CU	Group 2	Group 5	Group 6	UFS	Transnational
Core process	1. Norm contrast (encountering different "rules" of communication and collaboration)	Differences in communication expectations interpreted through professional practice: clarity, leadership communication, inclusive teamwork	Differences in communication style interpreted through continued interaction; similarities in style prioritised to enable task progress	Norm contrast focuses on procedural collaboration expectations: punctuality, attendance, responsiveness	Norm contrast centres on interaction style: expressing opinions versus reading the room and pacing speech according to social atmosphere	Differences bridged using prior multicultural experience from work settings as a scaffold to connect with US and Russian counterparts	Participants compare cultural norms: hierarchy vs egalitarian interaction, debate vs mutual understanding, multilingual communication
	2. Constraint-driven learning (skills emerge through managing barriers and difficulty)	Communication misunderstandings and gaps lead participants to regulate their own listening and explanation strategies	Communication difficulty due to clashing working norms led to task-oriented exchanges becoming the operative language of the COIL	Collaboration challenges such as delayed responses or uneven participation become main triggers for learning about fairness and accountability	Hesitation to speak and uncertainty about expressing opinions create a learning space centred on developing voice and communicative confidence	Communication difficulties predicted through prior experience in the US case; reliance on translation technology in the Russian case	Language differences, time zones, and cultural misunderstandings require empathy and deliberate adaptation of communication styles

Category	Dimension	CU	Group 2	Group 5	Group 6	UFS	Transnational
Enabling condition	3. Relational support and psychological safety (warmth, openness, and the sense that it is safe to speak, ask, and not know)	Listening and inclusive explanation practices enabled by a group atmosphere of mutual accountability	Bonding through the filming process created a relational dimension that compensated for limited cross-group interaction	Relational openness distinguished the Mexican collaboration (positive) from the Swiss collaboration (closed, less social); warmth enabled communication	Relational sensitivity shaped both hesitation and care for others' participation; safety to speak developed gradually through the experience	Connection built through deliberate accommodation and patience; effort required to sustain trust across language and cultural distance	Psychological safety, respect, and empathy emphasised as conditions for meaningful dialogue across linguistic and cultural difference
Enabling condition	4. Task authenticity (degree to which the task mirrored real disciplinary or professional practice)	X-Culture business task with real market relevance (Dubai medical niche) connected intercultural learning directly to professional and disciplinary knowledge	Joint video task required coordination across different working approaches; authenticity visible in the effort to align divergent production styles	Collaboration around shared deliverables made fairness, accountability, and coordination directly task-relevant	Joint video and discussion task created space for opinion expression and AI-related professional reflection	Tasks connected to workplace ethics, accommodation, and communication across cultural difference directly relevant to participants' current professional contexts	Cross-cultural professional comparison tasks connected learning to future professional mobility and international work

Category	Dimension	CU	Group 2	Group 5	Group 6	UFS	Transnational
Enabling condition	5. Reflective scaffolding (structured opportunities for reflection that allow contrast and difficulty to become conscious learning)	Participants openly analyse their own listening habits and communication responsibilities in the story circle setting	Task-progress exchanges became the main communicative form; the story circle created a retrospective reflective space	Reflection evaluates what makes teamwork effective or ineffective, particularly around motivation and participation norms	Reflection is primarily inward: participants examine hesitation, confidence, and cultural communication habits	Reflexivity operated through connecting COIL experience to prior lived contexts; story circle enabled participants to articulate and share that connection	Participants challenge assumptions, reflect on stereotypes, and recognise differences between individuals and cultures through dialogic narration
	6. Future-oriented transfer (participants connect COIL learning to future study, work, or professional identity)	Learning strongly connected to professional readiness and workplace collaboration skills	Participants expressed high relevance of COIL skills to current work and upcoming professional placements	Participants connect experiences to improving teamwork structures and expectations in future collaborations	Participants identify transferable skills: AI awareness, idea development, English communication, and confidence in expressing opinions	Participants showed enthusiasm for implementing COIL-developed skills to advance careers and improve workplace efficiency	Participants link experiences to global teamwork, intercultural communication, and future professional mobility
Outcome dimension	7. Ethical orientation (values emerge through interaction practices and the experience of working across difference)	Inclusion enacted through accessibility awareness, explanation practices, and responsibility for enabling others' participation	Participants developed teamwork and coordination protocols that enabled ethical contribution to the joint task despite structural constraints	Ethical concerns focus on fairness, responsibility, and equal participation in group work	Ethical orientation centres on enabling voice, encouraging participation, and balancing self-expression with relational sensitivity	Participants built on existing workplace ethical principles to manage dilemmas arising from the COIL; accommodation and listening-for understanding as core ethical values	Psychological safety, respect, and empathy emphasised as conditions for meaningful and ethical dialogue

6.2.1 The core process: norm contrast and constraint-driven learning

Norm contrast was the most pervasive trigger across the dataset. Students consistently reported that intercultural learning was initiated by encountering working styles, communicative expectations, or participation norms that differed from what they had taken for granted. The quantitative data from Q4 and Q5 broadly established this: students described adjusting assumptions about punctuality, directness, communication pace, and initiative after recognising that their own defaults were not universal. The Story Circle data gave this process its specificity. CR's encounter with Mexican peers' approach to time in Group 5, DB's confrontation with her assumptions about Japanese proactivity in the Transnational circle, AA's recognition of contrasting participation norms in Group 6, and MT's experience of cultural fit with American partners contrasted against cultural distance with Russian partners in the UFS case all show norm contrast functioning not as cultural information transfer but as a disruptive encounter that forced re-examination of embedded habits. Across these cases, learning did not follow automatically from the encounter. It followed from the sequence: the norm became visible through contrast, was then held up for examination through reflection, and only then became a resource for adjustment or development (See Table 5). This process-oriented account extends existing COIL research, which typically reports outcomes without tracing the sequence through which they emerge (O'Dowd, 2021; Bassani & Buchem, 2019).

Friction and constraint-driven learning operated as a closely related trigger. Where norm contrast involved the recognition of difference, friction involved the practical difficulty of working across it: coordination breakdowns, unresponsive partners, unequal effort, communication requiring constant repair, and language barriers demanding creative workarounds. The quantitative data showed this was widespread: Q3 responses indicated that leadership and problem-solving emerged precisely in strained group situations,



and Q4 responses showed that a meaningful minority of students found collaboration harder than expected. The Story Circle data examined friction at a closer range. ZV at UFS described learning to hold back and wait for Russian partners to articulate their needs - patience developed through the repeated experience of restraining her own communicative instinct. MM at UFS described actively learning Russian greetings and framing her effort explicitly as meeting the other halfway. TE in Group 2 described finding a way to produce a coherent joint product with partners who worked entirely separately and delivered finished items rather than collaborating in the process. In each case, the constraint did not automatically produce learning; it produced learning because the student reflected on it and adapted. Thus, friction is pedagogically valuable only when it is processed, not merely endured (Kučerová, 2023).

6.2.2 Enabling condition 1: Relational support and psychological safety

The core process was significantly amplified when participants experienced relational support in the form of warmth, openness, mutual responsiveness, and the sense that it was safe to speak, ask, and not know. The survey data gave limited visibility to this: open-ended responses captured outcomes but not the relational conditions that made them possible. The Story Circle data made it central. IS in Group 5 described the Mexican collaboration as characterised by conversational openness in ways that made communication feel natural and collaborative; the contrast with the Swiss group was framed not in terms of task performance but of social ease. AR in Group 6 described her hesitation about making direct requests precisely because of her attentiveness to how it might affect others; thus, relational sensitivity was both a constraint on expressive participation and evidence of a values-level ethical orientation. EV in Group 2 described the bonding that emerged through filming together as one of the most valued moments of the entire experience.

And NO at UFS reflected that building genuine connection across difference took real effort: "it took a lot out of one to actually build this connection." These accounts confirm what research on psychological safety in collaborative learning has established: that relational conditions are not merely pleasant background features but active enablers of intercultural risk-taking (Golubeva & Guntersdorfer, 2020; Gonda et al., 2024; Wei & Han, 2025). Where relational support was absent, the core process could not run at depth, even when the task was well-designed.

6.2.3 Enabling condition 2: Task authenticity

The second enabling condition concerns the nature of the task itself. Both phases of the study consistently showed that learning was richer, more professionally relevant, and more transferable when the COIL task was authentically connected to disciplinary practice. The quantitative synthesis was direct: value is most significant when tasks mirror authentic disciplinary practice. The story circle data confirmed and extended this. DS's engagement with the Dubai market in a business task that had genuine professional stakes, law students at Limpopo advising across jurisdictions, psychology students at Venda examining cross-cultural mental health frameworks, and Group 2 students producing a video that required them to coordinate across completely different production approaches. They all show that authentic tasks activated the full K-S-A-V cycle. Students were not only acquiring skills but also engaging values, revising attitudes, and building contextually relevant professional knowledge. Where tasks felt generic or disconnected from disciplinary realities, the core process still sometimes ran - norm contrast and friction were still present - but the learning it produced was shallower and less easily connected to professional identity or future work. This extends the argument of Flammia et al., (2016) and Velinov et al., (2021), and has a critical implication for interpreting pre-post survey studies: intercultural competence gains documented in such studies may be overstated or under-contextualised in programmes where tasks remain abstract, because the depth and transferability of learning appear to depend substantially on how closely the task approximates the challenges students will actually face.

6.2.4 Enabling condition 3: Reflective scaffolding

The third enabling condition is the provision of structured opportunities for reflection. The core process - contrast, reflection, adjustment - requires the middle step to be supported. Where reflection was incidental or unscaffolded, the encounter with difference often produced adjustment without understanding, or frustration without growth. The Story Circle format was analytically important here: it was through the oral, dialogic, and collective character of the sessions that the deepest reflexive processing became visible. DB's account of her disrupted assumptions about Japanese students, ZV's connection of the COIL experience to her prior experience of being misinterpreted as a young Black South African, and EV's reflection on the value of bonding in Group 2 all show learning that was not simply recalled but actively constructed through the act of narrating and hearing others respond. This is consistent with research demonstrating that structured post-experience reflection deepens intercultural reflexivity (Peng & Dervin, 2023; Liddicoat, 2024; Furuta-Fudeuchi, 2018). The present study extends that literature by showing the specific value of oral Story Circles over written formats: one participant's articulation of an experience triggered recognition and elaboration in another, producing a form of collective sense-making that individual reflection cannot replicate. The method contributed not only to data collection but also to the reflexive process under study - a point developed in Section 6.4.

Taken together, the two-level account proposed here (a core process of norm contrast and constraint-driven learning, enabled by relational support, task authenticity, and reflective scaffolding) moves beyond documenting that COIL works and begins to explain how it works, under what conditions, and why the same design can produce very different learning in different contexts. The quantitative data establish the breadth of these patterns across institutions and

disciplines; the qualitative data establish their depth, sequence, and conditionality. Both levels of the account are needed to understand COIL as a learning environment rather than simply as an international contact opportunity.

The findings suggest that COIL learning did not emerge through exposure alone, but through iterative processes of negotiation across conditions of difference, uncertainty, and interdependence. However, these experiences only became developmentally productive when accompanied by relational support, authentic collaborative purpose, and opportunities for structured reflection.

6.3 Why context matters

One of the clearest findings across both phases of the study is that students did not experience COIL uniformly. While many participants described meaningful development in communication, intercultural awareness, reflexivity, collaboration, and professional confidence, others reported far more limited learning or even frustration and disengagement. These differences are analytically significant because they challenge assumptions that intercultural or employability learning emerges automatically through exposure to international collaboration. Rather, the findings suggest that COIL learning is uneven, contextually mediated, and strongly shaped by the interaction between task design, disciplinary framing, prior experience, relational dynamics, and opportunities for reflection.

This unevenness was visible already in the survey phase. Some students described the COIL exchange as their first meaningful opportunity to work across national and cultural boundaries, while others had previously engaged with international content, multicultural environments, or earlier forms of exchange. For students with limited prior exposure, the experience often carried a stronger sense of novelty and disruption. Activities such as negotiating communication

styles, coordinating across time zones, or adapting to unfamiliar work expectations were experienced as significant developmental encounters. By contrast, students who already operated within highly diverse educational or social environments sometimes reported less dramatic shifts, describing COIL as an extension or refinement of competencies they had already begun developing elsewhere. This suggests that the developmental significance of COIL depends partly on the experiences and assumptions students bring into the collaboration itself.

Disciplinary context also shaped how students interpreted and valued their learning. Across the dataset, students consistently understood professional relevance through the lens of their own disciplinary formation. Law students frequently framed ethics in terms of professional conduct, client interaction, copyright, and legal responsibility, while psychology students focused more strongly on wellbeing, empathy, and culturally situated understandings of mental health. Education students engaged prominently with inclusion, decolonisation, and SDG-related pedagogical concerns, whereas business students often emphasised communication, negotiation, leadership, and international work practices. These differences are important because they demonstrate that COIL learning does not occur independently of disciplinary context. Rather, students recognise and interpret learning through the professional frameworks, values, and practices associated with their fields.

The quality and depth of interaction further shaped the extent to which learning became meaningful. Students who described sustained collaboration, active communication, and reciprocal engagement generally reported deeper forms of reflection, adaptation, and intercultural awareness. By contrast, where communication remained superficial, fragmented, or highly uneven, students often reported weaker learning outcomes or frustration with the process itself.

Several respondents explicitly linked limited learning to minimal interaction, lack of participation, or communication constrained to functional task coordination. These findings suggest that intercultural learning depends not simply on the presence of international peers, but on the existence of meaningful collaborative negotiation across difference. Exposure alone was insufficient. What mattered was the quality of interaction and the extent to which students were required to engage actively with one another's perspectives, expectations, and working practices.

Task design and facilitation emerged as equally important contextual mediators. The strongest evidence of reflective and professionally meaningful learning appeared where COIL tasks were clearly structured, authentically connected to disciplinary practice, and intentionally designed to engage broader societal or ethical questions. Where sustainability, ethics, or intercultural dialogue were explicitly embedded into the task, students frequently demonstrated deeper reflection and stronger engagement with these dimensions. By contrast, where tasks lacked conceptual integration or where disciplinary connections remained weak, students often struggled to recognise the relevance of the collaboration beyond completing the assignment itself. In this sense, the findings suggest that the educational value of COIL is not self-generating, but pedagogically produced through design, facilitation, and reflective scaffolding.

Such context dependence aligns with the literature showing that learning in COIL exchange varies according to interactional and pedagogical design. Helm (2025) demonstrates that different VE designs position students differently and therefore shape different kinds of communicative and intercultural learning. Similarly, Xu (2023) contends that metacultural awareness develops differently depending on whether students are placed in comparative or collaborative task structures.

Scherer Bassani and Buchem (2019) provide empirical evidence from the InterCult project that the design of a COIL exchange, including its task structure, platform choices, and group composition, shapes how students engage with intercultural collaboration and what competences they develop. O'Dowd (2006, 2018) extends this by demonstrating that task design can mitigate or exacerbate participation gaps, influence expressiveness, and shape intercultural stance-taking in COIL settings. The present study extends this work by showing that COIL surfaces not only visible cultural differences, such as language or punctuality, but also deeply embedded interactional scripts around initiative, silence, hierarchy, and participation.

Importantly, the findings also caution against romanticising difference or assuming that intercultural interaction is inherently transformative. Students did not encounter difference only as enriching or productive. In some cases, they experienced frustration, uneven participation, communication breakdowns, uncertainty, and conflicting expectations regarding responsibility, punctuality, or work ethic. These moments of difficulty were particularly significant because they reveal that intercultural learning is not always comfortable, harmonious, or linear. At the same time, the findings suggest that such tensions can become developmentally productive when students are supported in reflecting on and working through them rather than simply enduring them. Where opportunities existed for dialogue, reflexivity, and collaborative problem-solving, moments of friction frequently became catalysts for greater self-awareness, adaptability, and relational learning.

From this perspective, the study supports a more situated and process-oriented understanding of intercultural and career-relevant learning.



COIL did not function as a universally transformative intervention producing identical outcomes across contexts. Rather, learning emerged unevenly through specific constellations of disciplinary framing, relational dynamics, task authenticity, prior exposure, communicative negotiation, and reflective engagement. The findings therefore challenge simplistic assumptions that internationalisation alone produces global competence. Instead, they suggest that meaningful intercultural and professional learning depends on the quality of the pedagogical, relational, and reflective conditions within which international collaboration takes place.

6.4 Communication, Language, Reflexivity and Ethics as Intertwined dimensions of professional learning

One of the most significant findings across the study is that students did not experience communication, reflexivity, ethics, and language as separate or isolated dimensions of learning. Rather, these dimensions became deeply intertwined through the practical realities of digitally mediated collaboration across difference. Students were not simply learning how to communicate internationally in a technical sense. They were learning how to negotiate meaning, participation, misunderstanding, inclusion, responsibility, and relational dynamics under conditions of linguistic, cultural, and institutional diversity. In this sense, professional learning within COIL emerged as fundamentally relational and interactional.

Communication was central across both the survey and Story Circle phases, but students rarely described it merely as the transfer of information. Instead, communication involved navigating tone, directness, silence, participation patterns, timing, clarification, and differing assumptions about appropriate interaction. Students described learning how to phrase questions more carefully, how to make space for quieter participants, how to adjust explanations, and how to communicate more sensitively across cultural and linguistic differences. In several cases, students also became aware of their own communicative defaults, recognising that assumptions regarding directness, responsiveness, or participation were not universally shared. Oggel et al. (2022) highlight that students must adapt to different communicative demands across synchronous meetings, asynchronous messaging, and shared documents, each of which shapes their participation and interaction in the COIL exchange. Scherer Bassani and Buchem's (2019) InterCult project similarly demonstrates that communication in COIL is not simply a

competence students bring to the task but one they develop through it. What the present study adds is attention to the micro-level communicative negotiations that occurred across those platforms: the informal calibrations of tone, candour, pace, and formality that shaped whether collaboration felt inclusive or excluding.

Importantly, communication often became visible precisely when it became difficult. Misunderstandings, delayed responses, silences, uneven participation, and differences in working styles required students to move beyond routine forms of interaction and engage more deliberately with the collaborative process itself. Research on intercultural silence consistently shows that the meaning of silence varies substantially across cultural and interactional contexts. Fujio (2004), in a case study of Japanese-American business communication, demonstrates that silence functions as a communicative strategy whose interpretation depends on culturally situated expectations, and that misreading silence as disengagement or disagreement can produce significant collaborative difficulties. Jokinen and Allwood (2010) extend this to non-verbal hesitation, showing that embodied signals such as shoulder shrugging carry different communicative weight across intercultural encounters - a finding that resonates with participants who described confusion about whether peers were uncertain, disagreeing, or simply thinking. What became visible in the data was a disposition that participants rarely named explicitly but consistently demonstrated: interpretive generosity - treating communicative ambiguity as an invitation rather than a problem. This orientation was not explicitly taught in any of the COIL programmes studied, suggesting it represents an underdeveloped area in COIL design.

Golubeva and Guntersdorfer (2020), in their framework for addressing empathy in intercultural COIL exchange, argue that genuine attentiveness in COIL settings involves a form of recognition that exceeds task-focused comprehension it includes attending to what others are trying to express, not only what they manage to say. Lenkaitis and Loranc-Paszylk (2019), in their study of global citizenship development in lingua franca virtual exchanges, similarly show that the quality of listening shapes whether participants feel included or marginalised in collaborative settings. A more specific insight emerging from the data is that listening here functioned as a form of ethical recognition: to listen carefully in an intercultural and linguistically uneven setting is to acknowledge the speaker's effort, to make space for imperfect expression, and to signal that the other's contribution is valued. Communication therefore became a form of negotiation rather than a neutral or automatic skill. These findings suggest that communication competence within globally networked environments cannot be understood simply as clarity of expression, but rather as the capacity to engage constructively with ambiguity, difference, and relational complexity.

Language played an equally important role within these processes. The findings indicate that language was not merely a medium through which collaboration occurred, but a condition shaping participation itself. Students repeatedly referred to difficulties expressing themselves fully in English, uncertainty about wording, hesitation in group discussions, and the cognitive effort required to communicate across linguistic differences. Several participants described relying on translation tools, simplifying explanations, or carefully monitoring how their messages might be interpreted. Others reflected on how language proficiency influenced confidence, visibility, and willingness to participate within group interactions. At the same time, students also described language development as relationally embedded rather than formally instructional. Learning occurred through authentic communicative necessity: negotiating tasks,

clarifying misunderstandings, maintaining group cohesion, and explaining ideas to others. This aligns with work on willingness to communicate and context-dependent L2 confidence (Ross-Sokolovsky et al., 2024; Ramachandran & Kaur, 2021; Fonseca-Chacana, 2023), as well as with Lino and Wistner's (2024) finding that regular ELF interaction in online settings produces measurable gains in both speaking proficiency and intercultural communicative competence. In this sense, language development was inseparable from collaboration itself. Importantly, the findings also suggest that linguistic asymmetries shaped group dynamics and participation opportunities. Students with greater linguistic confidence often occupied more visible communicative roles, while others became quieter or more hesitant contributors. This highlights the ethical and relational dimensions of language within international collaboration, where communication practices may either enable or constrain inclusive participation.

The present study also documents a more qualitative shift that quantitative instruments may not fully capture. The Story Circle methodology in itself prompted students to use language effort to signal recognition, respect, and willingness to meet others halfway. A related contribution concerns a professional register of metacommunicative development. CU students (MS, Coventry) made this professional register especially clear. Students were reflecting not only on whether they could speak, but on how concisely, clearly, and purposefully they could communicate under professional conditions. This metacommunicative dimension, communicating not just correctly, but efficiently and with appropriate brevity in dense team environments, connects the language theme directly to the study's broader argument about career-relevant learning, and extends current ELT and COIL frameworks, which tend to focus on confidence and proficiency rather than on metacommunicative control as a distinct professional competency.

Further, reflexivity similarly emerged not as an abstract educational outcome, but as a practical response to encountering difference. Across the study, students described becoming more aware of their own assumptions regarding punctuality, professionalism, communication style, hierarchy, participation, and work expectations. Consistent with Peng and Dervin's (2023) emphasis on dialogic reflexivity in intercultural exchange, and with Liddicoat's (2019) work on reflective practice in intercultural language learning, participants across the cases demonstrated not only that they had reflected on their experiences, but that reflection was triggered by dialogic encounter by hearing others' interpretations of shared situations, or by having their own assumptions named and questioned in conversation. Furuta-Fudeuchi (2018) notes that post-experience reflection in exchange programmes is most productive when structured and intersubjective, a point consistent with the role of the story circles in the present study. The self-regulated learning (SRL) literature offers a related perspective: Rasmussen & Sieck (2012) show that intercultural competence development requires more than exposure to difference; it depends on learners' metacognitive ability to monitor, evaluate, and adjust their interpretations and responses.

What is especially striking in this study is the time-based dimension of reflexivity: students often became reflexive only after a period of confusion or friction had passed, and through a collective process in which another participant's account made their own experience legible. In many cases, this awareness emerged through moments of discomfort, misunderstanding, or failed coordination. Rather than simply learning about other cultures, students frequently reflected on themselves in relation to others, reconsidering practices they had previously regarded as normal or universal. This form of reflexivity is significant because it extends beyond intercultural awareness toward a more situated form of professional self-understanding. Students were not only adapting behaviour strategically in order to complete tasks

but increasingly recognising the relational consequences of how they communicated and collaborated. Several participants described learning to listen more carefully, accommodate different working styles, reconsider deficit assumptions, or become more conscious of inclusion and participation dynamics within teams. Reflexivity therefore became closely connected to professional judgement and relational responsibility.

Bozalek and Zembylas (2020), in their theorisation of response-able pedagogy, provide a framework for understanding how higher education settings can create conditions in which students experience themselves as genuinely responsible to and for one another. The present study confirms that students repeatedly judged collaboration in these normative terms, whether it was fair, supportive, welcoming, patient, inclusive, and psychologically safe. This resonates with research on inclusive collaborative learning, which emphasises meaningful participation, equitable interaction, and supportive group dynamics (Forslund Frykedal & Hammar Chiriac, 2018). Although COIL literature frequently highlights inclusion, belonging, and relational support, these dynamics are rarely theorised explicitly through the construct of psychological safety. The present findings extend this work by showing that students described collaborative conditions that closely align with psychological safety as understood in both organisational research (Edmondson, 1999) and recent work on online interdisciplinary student teams in higher education (Gonda et al., 2024; Wei & Han, 2025). The findings also suggest that ethics was often embedded within interaction itself rather than appearing only as explicit disciplinary content. While some students engaged directly with formal ethical issues related to law, healthcare, decolonisation, sustainability, or professional conduct, many others encountered ethics more implicitly through the collaborative process.

Questions of fairness, inclusion, accommodation, respect, patience, and shared responsibility repeatedly emerged within students' accounts of teamwork. Students described negotiating unequal participation, supporting less confident peers, adapting to different communication needs, and attempting to create more inclusive group environments. In this sense, ethical learning often occurred not through abstract discussion alone, but through the lived experience of working with others across difference.

Importantly, these dimensions of learning were rarely experienced independently of one another. Communication difficulties prompted reflexivity. Language differences shaped participation and ethical responsibility. Reflexive awareness altered communicative behaviour. Ethical concerns emerged through collaboration itself. The findings therefore point toward a more integrated understanding of professional competence in which communication, language, reflexivity, and ethics function as interconnected dimensions of relational practice rather than discrete employability skills. This has important implications for how professional readiness is conceptualised within higher education. Contemporary employability discourse often separates competencies into categories such as communication skills, teamwork, leadership, intercultural competence, or ethical awareness. The present findings instead suggest that professional capability within globally networked and digitally mediated environments is inherently relational, requiring graduates to navigate communicative complexity, linguistic diversity, interpersonal sensitivity, ethical responsibility, and reflective adaptation simultaneously. COIL appears particularly valuable in this regard because it creates conditions in which these dimensions are not taught abstractly but enacted through authentic collaborative interaction across contexts.

From this perspective, the significance of COIL extends beyond international exposure or generic

skills development. The findings suggest that COIL can function as a pedagogical environment in which students begin to practise forms of relational, communicative, and ethically situated professional engagement increasingly characteristic of contemporary global work and collaboration.

6.5 Contribution to COIL, employability, and global competence literature

This study contributes to existing COIL and internationalisation literature in several important ways. First, the findings extend current understandings of COIL beyond its frequent positioning as primarily an intercultural or internationalisation activity. While previous research has demonstrated that COIL can support intercultural awareness, global learning, and inclusive forms of internationalisation (Beelen & Jones, 2015; Howard et al., 2023; Wimpenny et al., 2022), the present study demonstrates more specifically how COIL may contribute to forms of career-relevant learning associated with digitally mediated and globally networked professional environments.

Importantly, the study suggests that these forms of learning do not emerge simply because students are exposed to cultural difference or international interaction. Rather, the findings indicate that development occurs through situated processes of communicative negotiation, collaborative problem-solving, reflexive adaptation, and relational coordination under authentic conditions of uncertainty and interdependence. In this sense, the study shifts attention from COIL as exposure toward COIL as process. The findings therefore contribute to emerging work that conceptualises intercultural and professional learning as relational, situated, and interactionally produced rather than as the acquisition of static competencies or cultural knowledge.

Second, the study contributes to employability literature by challenging narrow or instrumental understandings of professional readiness. Contemporary employability discourse frequently emphasises transferable skills such as communication, teamwork, adaptability, and leadership. While these dimensions were certainly visible in the findings, the analysis demonstrates that students experienced such competencies not as isolated skills acquired individually, but as interconnected and relationally enacted practices emerging through collaboration across difference. Communication, reflexivity, ethical awareness, language, participation, and inclusion repeatedly appeared as intertwined dimensions of professional learning rather than discrete categories of competence. The findings therefore support broader and more relational understandings of employability that emphasise adaptability, reflexive judgement, intercultural responsiveness, ethical engagement, and the capacity to work constructively under conditions of ambiguity and complexity (McCowan, 2014; Mbwanbo & Salanga, 2023). In particular, the study highlights the importance of relational adaptability and communicative negotiation as increasingly significant forms of professional capability within digitally networked work environments.

Third, the study contributes to debates on intercultural and global competence by challenging assumptions that international interaction is inherently transformative. Much internationalisation discourse continues implicitly to assume that exposure to diversity or international collaboration will naturally produce intercultural competence, empathy, or global awareness. The present findings suggest a more uneven and contextually mediated reality. Learning varied substantially depending on prior exposure, disciplinary framing, task authenticity, facilitation, relational dynamics, and opportunities for reflection. Intercultural learning therefore emerged not as an automatic consequence of participation, but as a conditional and pedagogically mediated process.

This is particularly important because the findings also demonstrate that moments of frustration, misunderstanding, uneven participation, and communicative difficulty were often central to students' developmental experiences. Rather than treating such tensions as evidence of failure, the study suggests that they may become productive sites of learning when accompanied by sufficient relational support, reflective scaffolding, and meaningful collaborative purpose. The findings therefore contribute to more process-oriented understandings of intercultural learning in which discomfort, negotiation, and reflexive adaptation are recognised as important dimensions of development.

Fourth, the study contributes methodologically through its integration of survey analysis and Story Circles. While survey data provided insight into broader patterns across institutions and disciplines, the Story Circle methodology enabled deeper exploration of how students narrated, interpreted, and made sense of their experiences. The findings suggest that Story Circles functioned not only as a method of data generation, but also as a reflexive pedagogical space within which participants revisited, interpreted, and rearticulated their learning. In this respect, the study contributes to emerging methodological discussions regarding narrative, dialogic, and participatory approaches to researching intercultural and global learning.

Fifth, the study contributes to debates on employability by suggesting that an important employability signal emerging from COIL is the combination of global readiness and reflective practice. Students valued the ability to work across differences, but they also highlighted the need for self-awareness, adjustment, care, and ethical responsibility towards others. In this sense, the findings align well with broader K-S-A-V framings of learning, while also suggesting that curiosity, reflection, relational accountability, and tolerance for ambiguity, which sit at the intersection of intercultural competence and professional formation, may merit greater attention in future models of career-relevant global learning.

Finally, the study contributes to current discussions on IaH and digitally mediated global learning by illustrating how internationally networked learning may create meaningful opportunities for intercultural and professional development without relying exclusively on physical mobility. Importantly, however, the findings also caution against simplistic assumptions that virtual exchange alone guarantees transformative learning. The educational value of COIL depended strongly on the quality of interaction, the authenticity of tasks, the depth of reflection, and the relational conditions supporting collaboration. The study therefore reinforces the importance of intentional pedagogical design within virtual internationalisation initiatives.

Taken together, the findings position COIL not simply as a technological or internationalisation intervention, but as a relational pedagogical environment through which students may begin to develop forms of communicative, reflexive, ethical, and adaptive professional capability increasingly required within contemporary globally interconnected contexts.



7. Recommendations

The following recommendations are drawn directly from the qualitative and quantitative findings of this study. They are organised by audience but are, in many cases, interconnected: what educators do depends on what institutions enable; what institutions prioritise depends on what policy supports. The recommendations do not prescribe universal solutions. The study's own findings show that COIL learning depends on the context, and the recommendations are made with that understanding, serving as evidence-based guidance rather than mandates.

7.1 For COIL Educators and Course Designers

7.1.1 Make participation norms an explicit object of learning, not an assumed shared background.

Across all six contexts in this study, the most productive intercultural moments arose when students encountered differences they had not anticipated, such as punctuality, directness, silence, initiative, and reading the social atmosphere. These differences were rarely addressed in task instructions or facilitator guidance, which meant students were left to interpret them alone. Educators should build structured opportunities before, during, and after the COIL exchange for students to surface and discuss their assumptions about how collaboration, communication, and participation work. This is not a sensitivity exercise; it is a prerequisite for the kind of learning the data shows is possible.

7.1.2 Design tasks that embed authentic professional or disciplinary problems.

Students across the study, particularly in the CU context, framed their intercultural learning in relation to concrete professional and market-specific situations rather than generic cultural comparison. This suggests that task authenticity, such as real problems with real disciplinary stakes, creates conditions for intercultural and career-relevant awareness to co-develop. Tasks designed purely as cultural exchange exercises may produce less durable learning than tasks that embed collaboration within a domain the students already care about professionally.

7.1.3 Build explicit mid-exchange reflection points, not only end-of-programme debriefs.

The study found that friction, including coordination breakdown, communication difficulty, and uneven engagement, became developmentally meaningful when students had a structured opportunity to process it collectively. Where no such space existed, the same friction remained demoralising. A facilitated mid-point check-in, designed not to solve problems but to name and reframe them, is one of the most low-cost, high-impact adjustments educators can make to existing COIL designs.



7.1.4 Create space for low-stakes relational interaction alongside formal task work.

Evidence from the study indicates that informal digital channels, including messaging platforms and side conversations, played a meaningful role in building the relational trust that enabled more open participation in formal tasks. Programmes that structure only the formal collaboration layer may inadvertently suppress the informal trust-building that underpins it. Educators should consider how to legitimise and lightly scaffold these informal spaces rather than treating them as incidental.

7.1.5 Do not treat non-engagement as a logistical failure.

Some students in this study experienced the COIL exchange as demoralising rather than developmental. In most cases, this appeared to be linked to the absence of a facilitated space to name and address what was going wrong. Educators should build an explicit checkpoint into their programmes (separate from assessment), at which students can raise difficulties with coordination, communication, or participation without penalty. Naming non-engagement is often the first step toward reframing it.

7.2 For Institutional Leaders and Internationalisation Officers

7.2.1 Treat COIL as a curriculum matter, not only a mobility metric.

The findings of this study suggest that the depth of learning COIL produces is directly linked to how it is embedded in the curriculum: whether tasks are disciplinarily grounded, whether facilitators are trained and supported, and whether students are helped to connect the experience to their wider academic and professional development. Institutions that count COIL participation as a mobility replacement without investing in these enabling conditions are unlikely to produce the kind of learning documented here. The question is not how many students participated, but under what conditions they did.

7.2.2 Invest in facilitator development, particularly around intercultural facilitation.

The study shows that what made COIL educationally productive was not the technology or the pairing of institutions alone, but the quality of facilitation, i.e., the ability to recognise when difference was becoming an obstacle rather than a resource, and to create conditions for students to process that. This is a specific pedagogical skill that requires development and support. Institutions should consider how to build facilitator capability not only in logistics and platform use, but in intercultural pedagogy and reflective practice.

7.2.3 Develop assessment and recognition frameworks that capture process, not only participation.

If the educational value of COIL lies in the dimensions documented in this study - intercultural awareness, communicative reflexivity, ethical orientation, career-relevant contextual knowledge - then counting participation hours or completion rates does not capture it. Institutions should explore how to develop credentialing or recognition pathways that invite students to articulate and evidence the specific capabilities they have developed, rather than simply recording that an exchange took place.

7.2.4 Plan for variation across disciplinary and national contexts.

This study found substantial differences in how COIL learning unfolded across different institutional and disciplinary settings. Institutions implementing COIL at scale should not assume that a single programme model will produce equivalent outcomes across different departments, student populations, or partner configurations. Monitoring and evaluation should be designed to detect these variations and inform context-sensitive adaptation, rather than to seek a single standardised delivery model.

7.3 For Policymakers and Funders of Exchange

7.3.1 Fund the enabling conditions, not only the exchange itself.

The evidence from this study consistently points to the same conclusion: the educational outcomes of COIL depend not only on the technology or the international pairing but also on task design, the quality of facilitation, reflective scaffolding, and institutional support. Funding models that support only the establishment of partnerships and the delivery of exchanges, without investing in the pedagogical infrastructure that makes those exchanges educationally meaningful, are likely to produce diminishing returns. Policymakers should consider how funding instruments can explicitly incentivise investment in facilitator training, curriculum integration, and longitudinal evaluation.

7.3.2 Support longitudinal evaluation of COIL outcomes.

The current evidence base for COIL largely relies on immediate post-programme surveys. This study's design, including a follow-up reflective component, suggests that some of the most significant learning (career transfer, sustained reflexivity, ethical formation) may not be visible immediately after the exchange. Funders should consider requiring and resourcing longitudinal follow-up as a standard component of COIL evaluation, rather than treating post-programme satisfaction as a sufficient proxy for impact.

7.3.3 Avoid one-size-fits-all policy models for exchange.

The context-dependence documented in this study is not an implementation problem to be resolved. It reflects the genuine variability of how intercultural learning works across disciplines, student populations, and institutional cultures. Policy frameworks that prescribe a single model of COIL in terms of duration, platform, task type, or partner configuration risk suppress the contextual responsiveness that the evidence suggests is essential. Policies should create enabling frameworks with sufficient flexibility for educators to adapt to their specific disciplinary and institutional contexts.

7.4 For Future Researchers in the COIL Exchange Field

7.4.1 Study the conditions of non-learning, not only learning.

This study found that some students experienced the COIL exchange as discouraging, and that mechanisms such as norm contrast, friction, and relational support were enabling rather than automatic. The existing literature is heavily weighted toward documenting positive outcomes. The field needs more research that examines, without apology, the conditions under which COIL does not produce development, what goes wrong, for whom, and why. This is not a critique of COIL; it is the kind of evidence that would most improve it.

7.4.2 Use oral and dialogic methods to access dimensions of learning that written surveys cannot reach.

The Story Circle methodology used in this study produced accounts of intercultural learning, including temporal reflexivity, collective disruption of stereotypes, and intersubjective recognition, which are unlikely to emerge from individual written journals or Likert-scale surveys. Researchers designing future COIL studies should consider oral and group-based methods not as alternatives to existing instruments, but as methodologically distinct tools that access different and complementary dimensions of the learning process.

7.4.3 Design studies that can distinguish context-specific from generalisable findings.

Much existing COIL research examines single exchanges in single settings, which makes it difficult to determine what is generalisable and what is specific to a particular design, facilitator, discipline, or partner pairing. Multi-context designs, whether comparative case studies, coordinated multi-site research, or longitudinal cohort tracking, would significantly strengthen the field's ability to offer actionable guidance. This study's four-context design offers one model; future work should build on and extend it.

7.4.4 Attend to intra-cultural variation and resist national-level generalisations.

Several accounts in this study showed students discovering that individuals within a national group behaved in ways that contradicted their initial expectations of that group. This finding that within-group variation is as important as between-group difference has implications for how researchers frame intercultural learning and how they report and interpret findings. Research designs and reporting conventions that treat national or cultural groups as homogeneous units risk reproducing the essentialism that COIL, at its best, is designed to unsettle.

The methodology developed in COILing careers, as well as PhD research on COIL at both CU and THUAS has led to initiatives focused on increasing the impact of COIL on employability and work-readiness in both the Global South and North. THUAS has submitted the Erasmus+ proposal 'CHEETAHS' for this purpose, together with partners in Norway, Germany, South Africa, Tanzania and Namibia⁷.

⁷Unfortunately, CU could not be a full partner since the UK has not rejoined the Erasmus Programme yet, but will be involved as an associate partner or as a full partner in case the project proposal is rejected and needs resubmission.

8. Reflection

At the outset, this project sought to better understand how students experience COIL and how such experiences may contribute to employability, intercultural competence, and professional readiness. While these concerns remained central throughout the study, the findings ultimately revealed a more complex and relational picture of learning than initially anticipated. What became increasingly visible across both the survey and Story Circle phases was that students did not simply acquire competencies through international exposure. Rather, learning emerged through processes of negotiation, uncertainty, discomfort, adaptation, reflection, and collaboration across difference.

One of the most significant insights of the study was the extent to which difficulty itself became pedagogically meaningful. Students frequently described moments of misunderstanding, uneven participation, communicative hesitation, frustration, and differing assumptions regarding time, responsibility, hierarchy, or participation. Yet these moments often became the very conditions through which deeper learning emerged. In many cases, students became more reflective not when collaboration proceeded smoothly, but when they were required to reconsider assumptions, negotiate expectations, or adapt their ways of communicating and working with others.

The study also highlighted the limitations of viewing internationalisation primarily through the lens of exposure or mobility. While COIL undoubtedly expanded students' access to international and intercultural engagement, the findings suggest that meaningful learning depended less on the mere presence of international interaction and more on the quality of the relationships, tasks, and reflective opportunities within the collaboration itself.

Some exchanges remained superficial or fragmented, while others created spaces for genuine dialogue, perspective-taking, and professional growth. This unevenness is important because it reminds us that global and intercultural learning are not automatic outcomes of participation, but processes that require intentional pedagogical design and sustained relational engagement.

The Story Circle phase further revealed dimensions of learning that were not fully visible within the survey responses alone. Through storytelling and collective reflection, participants were often able to articulate forms of learning that had initially been difficult to name, for example, shifts in self-awareness, greater sensitivity to participation and inclusion, awareness of communicative habits, or recognition of how language, culture, and confidence shape interaction. The Story Circles therefore became more than a method of data collection. They functioned as reflective spaces within which students revisited and reinterpreted their experiences through dialogue with others. In this sense, the process of reflection itself became part of the learning under investigation.

The project also highlighted important methodological insights regarding the study of intercultural and career-relevant learning within COIL environments. The combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches made it possible not only to identify broad patterns across contexts, but also to explore how students interpreted and narrated those experiences in more nuanced and relational ways. In many respects, the process of developing and implementing the methodology became a significant learning process in itself.



The study reinforced the importance of moving beyond surface-level evaluations of internationalisation activities toward more reflective and layered forms of inquiry capable of capturing uncertainty, unevenness, and the complexity of learning across difference. In this sense, the project contributed not only empirical findings, but also methodological insight into how globally networked learning experiences may be researched more meaningfully across contexts.

Perhaps one of the broader implications of the study is that professional and intercultural learning in digitally mediated global environments cannot easily be separated into discrete categories of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values. Students experienced these dimensions relationally and simultaneously through communication, collaboration, misunderstanding, accommodation, and reflexive adjustment. The findings therefore point toward a more situated understanding of global competence, one that is less concerned with mastery of cultural knowledge and more concerned with the capacity to engage constructively, ethically, and reflectively across conditions of complexity and difference.

At a broader level, the project also raises important questions for higher education and internationalisation more generally. In a context where internationalisation is increasingly shaped by technological change, global uncertainty, unequal access to mobility, and rapidly evolving professional environments, the challenge may no longer be simply how to connect students across borders, but how to create meaningful conditions for collaborative learning across difference. The findings of this study suggest that such learning depends not only on technology or international contact, but on the intentional cultivation of reflective, relational, and ethically grounded forms of engagement.

9. Conclusion

This study set out to explore how students experienced COIL exchange and how those experiences related to career preparation, intercultural competence, and professional practice across different institutional and disciplinary contexts. Across both the survey and Story Circle phases, the findings consistently suggest that COIL contributes to forms of learning that extend beyond intercultural exposure alone. Students described developing communication, adaptability, collaboration, reflexivity, ethical awareness, and greater confidence in working across cultural, linguistic, and professional differences. Importantly, however, these forms of learning emerged not simply through contact with international peers, but through the practical demands of negotiating difference under authentic collaborative conditions.

The study therefore suggests that COIL can function as a meaningful environment for career-relevant and globally situated professional learning. Students were required to coordinate tasks across time zones, navigate differing communication styles and work expectations, manage uncertainty and uneven participation, and reflect on their own assumptions and practices. In many cases, learning emerged through moments of difficulty, misunderstanding, adaptation, and negotiation rather than through smooth or idealised collaboration. This points toward a more relational and process-oriented understanding of professional readiness in which communication, reflexivity, ethics, and intercultural engagement are enacted together within collaborative practice.

The findings also demonstrate that these learning experiences were uneven and strongly shaped by context. Prior intercultural exposure, disciplinary framing, task authenticity, facilitation, relational dynamics, and opportunities for reflection all influenced how students experienced and interpreted COIL. The study therefore challenges assumptions that international interaction automatically produces intercultural competence or transformative learning. Rather, the educational value of COIL appears to depend substantially on the quality of the pedagogical and relational conditions within which collaboration takes place.

The OECD Learning Compass and Knowledge–Skills–Attitudes–Values (K-S-A-V) framework provided a useful interpretive lens for understanding the multidimensional nature of the learning described by students. The framework helped illuminate how communication, collaboration, adaptability, reflexivity, ethical awareness, and openness to difference emerged across the data. At the same time, the study did not operationalise or directly measure the OECD Transformative Competencies such as creating new value, reconciling tensions and dilemmas, or taking responsibility in any systematic or explicit way within the research design. Rather than functioning as a prescriptive evaluative framework, the OECD model served primarily as a broader conceptual orientation through which patterns of learning could be interpreted. The Story Circles in particular were designed as open and reflective narrative spaces focused on students' experiences of COIL and their understandings of future study, work, and collaboration, rather than as instruments specifically structured around the transformative competencies themselves.



This distinction is important because it highlights both the value and the limits of the present study. The findings do not claim to demonstrate the direct development of all dimensions of transformative competence as conceptualised by the OECD. However, the study does suggest that COIL may create important conditions through which students begin to practise forms of communication, reflexive adaptation, ethical engagement, and collaborative problem-solving increasingly associated with globally networked professional and societal contexts.

Ultimately, the study positions COIL not simply as a technological or internationalisation intervention, but as a relational pedagogical space in which students engage with the complexities of working across difference. In doing so, the findings suggest that meaningful professional and intercultural learning depends less on exposure alone, and more on the extent to which students are supported in navigating uncertainty, negotiating perspectives, reflecting on assumptions, and engaging constructively with others within authentic collaborative environments.

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Additional Resources from iKudu:

Haug, E. (2024). Editor iKudu COIL Handbook

Jacobs, L., Beelen, J. & Wimpenny, K. (2024). Editors. Conference Proceedings; iKudu Project Closing Conference

Appendices

Appendix- A: Dominant OECD K-S-A-V

Table 6: Dominant OECD K-S-A-V by case (matrix)

Context ⁸	Knowledge (dominant forms)	Skills (dominant forms)	Attitudes and Values (dominant forms)
CU (Germany, Dubai, America, and South Africa)	Intercultural and contextual knowledge tied to study and work settings; disciplinary contextualisation (business, HR, labs); self-knowledge about listening and communication habits	Active listening; inclusive communication and scaffolding; meta-cognitive self-regulation; virtual collaboration and coordination	Openness + accountability; inclusion, accommodation, fairness; responsibility for making others able to participate
Group 2 Netherlands (with Japan)	Knowledge of team organisation as well as task orientation needed to complete COIL task	Communication, coordination and shepherding skills to negotiate differences in communication and work norms.	Constantly prioritising connection, understanding, building bridges and achieving the end product.
Group 5 Netherlands, (Mexico and Switzerland)	Context knowledge of working norms (time, punctuality, responsiveness, motivation); learning about “what counts” as participation in other contexts	Coordination and repair skills (following up, adjusting expectations); negotiating group process; collaboration under uneven participation	Fairness and accountability framing; preference for structure; desire for relationship building before task focus
Group 6 Netherlands (all Japanese students)	Context knowledge of working norms (time, punctuality, responsiveness, motivation); learning about “what counts” as participation in other contexts	Coordination and repair skills (following up, adjusting expectations); negotiating group process; collaboration under uneven participation	Fairness and accountability framing; preference for structure; desire for relationship building before task focus

⁸Country partners engaged in the COIL exchange

Context ⁸	Knowledge (dominant forms)	Skills (dominant forms)	Attitudes and Values (dominant forms)
UFS (SA, US, Russia)	Knowledge of work tasks and intercultural interactions.	Communication, language and negotiation skills to enable COIL to function across multiple languages and cultures.	Inclusivity, Ubuntu and accommodation. These are the key values that this team utilised to navigate the COIL and create value.
Transnational	Intercultural knowledge via comparison across groups; awareness of hierarchy vs egalitarian norms; value of multilingual and cultural mannerisms; self-knowledge through reflection on assumptions	Empathy and perspective taking; communication across differences; adapting interaction for inclusion; coordination across time zones	Psychological safety and mutual respect; non-judgment norms; inclusivity; humanistic orientation (“we are all human”)

Appendix- B: Story Circles Guide For Participants

Story Circles: Building Intercultural Competence

You are about to take part in a Story Circle, a shared space for reflection and dialogue across cultures. The goal is to build intercultural competence through respectful storytelling and deep listening.

Text Box 1: The basics of Story Circles

Purpose

Story Circles help participants:

- Show respect for others and practise listening for understanding.
- Develop curiosity, empathy, and self-awareness.
- Reflect critically on intercultural learning.
- Build connections across cultural and disciplinary boundaries.

Core Reminders

- Everyone has a story worth sharing.
- We all have something to learn from others.
- Listening with empathy can be transformational.

Guidelines

- Maintain confidentiality: what's shared stays in the circle.
- Speak for yourself (use "I" statements).
- Keep stories simple and focused.
- Be authentic, open, and respectful.
- No interruptions, questions, or comments during storytelling.

Online Tips

- Test the camera and mic before joining.
- Feel free to keep the camera off.
- Mute when not speaking.
- No recording or screenshots.
- Rejoin quietly if disconnected

*Text Box 2: Story Circles Instructions***Set-up****Sit (or meet online) in a circle.**

- Agree on a signal to mark time.
- The person to the right of the storyteller keeps time.
- The first storyteller is the person whose birthday is closest to today.

Round 1 - Introductions (2 minutes each)

Briefly introduce yourself using:

Please tell us your name and what your favourite holiday or festival is, and why it is your favourite?

Note: Others listen silently for understanding.

Round 2 - Storytelling (3 minutes each)

Share your story using the prompt:

Please tell a specific, memorable COIL experience when you felt supported by your COIL VE community. What happened, and how did others show their support?

Note: Others listen silently for understanding.

Round 3 - Flashbacks (15 seconds each)

After all the stories, each listener recalls one memorable detail from another's story.

Round 4 - Group Discussion

1. What similarities or differences did you notice in the stories, especially in how people described working with others from different cultures or study areas?
2. After hearing these stories, what areas of intercultural or professional practice are you now more curious about in your studies or current work?
3. How did listening to other people's stories help you understand viewpoints different from your own?
4. How has COIL-VE experience helped you gain further intercultural insights about improving relationships with people who are different from you?
5. Reflecting on your COIL-VE experience, what are one or two key insights or skills you've gained, and how would you like to use them to make a positive impact in your future direction?

Appendix-C: Certificate of Participation



UNIVERSITY OF THE
FREE STATE
UNIVERSITEIT VAN DIE
VRYSTAAT
YUNIVESITHI YA
FREISTATA



THE HAGUE
UNIVERSITY OF
APPLIED SCIENCES

Certificate of Participation

This is to certify that

xxxxxx

Engaged in a

“COILing Careers” Story Circle

Supported by ESRC Follow-on Funding

Collaboratively hosted across:

Coventry University, Research Centre Global Learning (GLEA), UK
The Hague University of Applied Sciences, Centre for Global and Inclusive Learning (GIL), The Netherlands
The University of Free State, Directorate for International Partnerships and Relations (DIPR), South Africa

Prof L. Jacobs, DIPR

Prof K. Wimpenny, GLEA

Prof. J. Beelen, GIL

Appendix-D: Consent Form

CONSENT FORM for 'COILing Careers'

You are invited to take part in a Story Circle as part of our research study "COILing Careers" to share insights about your Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) experience.

The purpose of this research is to extend and evidence the impact of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) on students' transversal skill development and career trajectories.

Before you decide to take part, please **read the accompanying Participant Information Sheet and Research Participants Privacy Notice**, available on our website at <https://www.coventry.ac.uk/gdpr-and-data-protection/privacy-notice/>.

Researcher(s):

Prof. Katherine Wimpenny	k.wimpenny@coventry.ac.uk
Prof. Lynette Jacobs	jacobs1@ufs.ac.za
Prof. Jos Beelen	J.M.H.J.Beelen@hhs.nl
Preeti Suri	surip2@uni.coventry.ac.uk (CU Project Assistant)
Tafadzwa Ruzive	Ruzive.T@ufs.ac.za (UFS Project Assistant)
Liza Shevchenko	Y.Shevchenko@student.hhs.nl (THUAS Project Assistant)

This form is to confirm that you understand what the purposes of the research project are and what will be involved, and that you agree to take part. If you are happy to participate, please initial each box to indicate your agreement, sign and date the form, and return it to the researcher.

Please do not hesitate to ask questions if anything is unclear or if you would like more information about any aspect of this research. It is important that you feel able to take the necessary time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

1	I confirm that I have read and understood the <u>Participant Information Sheet</u> for the above research project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.	
2	I understand that all the information I provide will be held securely and treated confidentially.	
3	I understand my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my participation without giving a reason by contacting the lead researcher at any time until the date specified in the Participant Information Sheet.	
4	I understand that the results of this research will be used in academic papers and other formal research outputs, including anonymised data that may be made available for reuse in similar future research projects.	
5	I am happy for the interview to be audio- or video-recorded.	
6	I agree to take part in the above research project.	

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Name of Researcher

Signature

Date

Appendix-E: Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet for 'COILing Careers'

You are invited to take part in a Story Circle as part of our research study "COILing Careers" to share insights about your Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) experience.

Prof. Katherine Wimpenny, Centre for Global Learning at Coventry University (CU), Prof. Lynette Jacobs, University of the Free State, South Africa (UFS), and Prof. Jos Beelen, The Hague University of Applied Sciences (THUAS), The Netherlands, are leading this research. Before you decide to take part, it is important you understand why the research is being conducted and what it will involve.

What is the purpose of this research?

The overarching purpose of this study is to extend and evidence the impact of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) as a specific virtual exchange approach on students' transversal skill development and career trajectories. In doing so, what we learn from this study will not only inform an impact case study on how COIL offers scope to transform the internationalisation of the curriculum, with an emphasis on equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) as part of professional practice development, but also we will create an Impact Tracker Tool. This tool will enable ongoing mapping of undergraduate and graduates' experiences as they transition from their degrees into professional careers or advanced studies, thus providing robust, longitudinal evidence of how COIL exchange is able to contribute to academic and societal benefits.

Who is organising and funding the research?

The research is organised by Coventry University (CU) in collaboration with partner institutions of the iKUDU network, including the University of the Free State (UFS) in South Africa and the Hague University of Applied Sciences (THUAS) in the Netherlands. It is supported through ESRC IAA Follow-On Funding. The research was granted ethics approval through Coventry University's Research Ethics review and approval process.

Do I have to take part?

No – it is entirely up to you. If you do decide to take part, please keep this Information Sheet and complete the Consent Form to show that you are happy to participate. Please note down your participant number and provide this to the lead researcher if you wish to withdraw from the research. You are free to withdraw until 2 weeks after the Story Circle, after which your data will be analysed as part of the group data.

What will happen if I decide to take part?

We would value your participation in a local Story Circle (at either CU, UFS, or THUAS). The Story Circle will take place online via Teams or Zoom. Please note that you are also welcome to keep your camera off, and breakout rooms will **not** be recorded, ensuring a safe and respectful space for open sharing. The total time commitment will be approximately 90 minutes. The experience follows a phased approach: Following the local Story Circle, we also plan to have a transnational Story Circle, which some of you might be willing to join using a similar format, but with students across CU, UFS and THUAS.

The Story Circle session follows a structured format:

Round 1: Introductions – Share your name and three words or phrases that describe your background and why they matter to you (2 minutes each).

Round 2: Intercultural Storytelling – Describe a memorable COIL-VE experience with someone different from you, what you learned, and any curiosity it sparked (3 minutes each).

Round 3: Flashback Round – Each listener briefly reflects on what stood out in another's story (15 seconds each).

Whole-group Debrief – Facilitators guide a reflection using prompts like "I used to think... now I think..." and explore how the experience might shape your future (in terms of studies, collaboration and professional career).

Facilitators provide instructions and support but do not join small groups. **Even if they do, no personal data will be recorded.** Timekeeping is closely managed, and the starting speaker is chosen randomly—often by birthday proximity to the session date.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited to participate in this follow-on study because you have taken part in a COIL which had a connection to iKUDU. Your insights will help us understand how transversal skills—those applicable across varying professional and academic contexts—are developed through COIL. They will also serve to inform development of an Impact Tracker Tool to follow undergraduates' and graduates' outcomes and highlight how these experiences serve to shape employability and future study pathways.

What are the potential benefits and risks in taking part?

By participating, you will help the research team better understand how COIL supports students' transversal skill development and career readiness. This may also include contributing to the design of new or improved support frameworks for future students and staff.

The research team have considered the risks involved in this project and taken steps to mitigate them, for example, we will ensure that we have your consent to include any image you may have shared linked to the Story Circle. Otherwise, your participant identities will be protected and anonymised. If you would like more information, please contact the lead researcher (Professor Katherine Wimpenny) on the contact details below.

Will my information be handled confidentially?

All information provided will be kept securely. As your participation is anonymous, your data will be treated strictly confidentially. The research team will handle your data safely and in accordance with CU Policies, Standards, and Procedures, including our Research Ethics and Integrity Statements and our Research Privacy Notice available on our website at <https://www.coventry.ac.uk/gdpr-and-data-protection/privacy-notices/>.

What will happen to the results of the research?

The results will be summarised in published articles, reports, presentations, and potentially creative outputs. Additionally, the findings will inform the design of an Impact Tracker Tool that extends current COIL evaluation frameworks to trace graduates' experiences and feedback post-degree. They will also contribute to our respective universities' Impact Case Studies, illustrating how COIL enhances the internationalisation of the curriculum for EDI-inspired professional practice development. Any quotes or key findings will be anonymised in formal outputs unless you have given your explicit written permission to attribute them to you by name / through visual representation.

What will happen next?

If you would like to take part, please contact Preeti Suri (CU), Tafadzwa Ruzive (UFS) or Lize Shevchenko (THUAS) in the first instance. You will be asked to complete a consent form. After that, a date and time of your choice for an interview or story circle will be arranged with you.

Research team contact details:

Prof. Katherine Wimpenny	k.wimpenny@coventry.ac.uk	
Prof. Lynette Jacobs	jacobs1@ufs.ac.za	
Prof. Jos Beelen	J.M.H.J.Beelen@hhs.nl	
Preeti Suri	surip2@uni.coventry.ac.uk	(CU Project Assistant)
Tafadzwa Ruzive	Ruzive.T@ufs.ac.za	(UFS Project Assistant)
Liza Shevchenko Assistant)	Y.Shevchenko@student.hhs.nl	(THUAS Project)

Who do I contact if I have any questions or concerns?

Please contact Katherine Wimpenny above if you still have concerns. If you wish to make a complaint, please contact the University's Research Ethics and Integrity Manager at ethics.uni@coventry.ac.uk and provide the reference [P185846].

Thank you for taking the time to read this and for considering participating in this research.

P185846



Certificate of Ethical Approval

Applicant: Prof. Katherine Wimpenny
Project Title: 'COILing Careers through iKUDU'

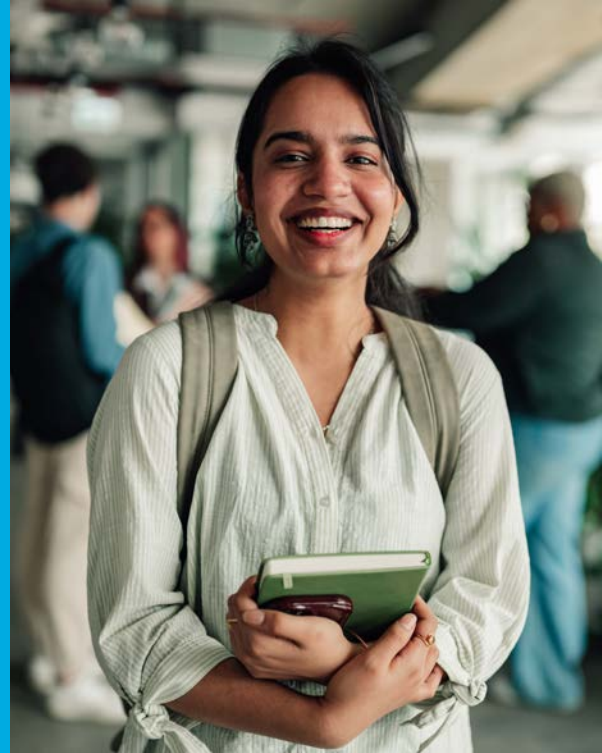
This is to certify that the above named applicant has completed the Coventry University Ethical Approval process and their project has been confirmed and approved as Medium Risk

Date of approval: 24 Apr 2025
Project Reference Number: P185846









The Contribution of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) to Career-Relevant Learning

