



The Global Learning Podcast Episode 2:

Jon Rubin on COIL

Meet Jon Rubin:



Jon Rubin was Founder and served as Director of the SUNY COIL Center from 2006-2017. He directed the National Endowment for the Humanities funded: COIL Institute for Globally Networked Learning in the Humanities (2010-13), which engaged 47 U.S. and international universities in COIL course development. He also led the COIL Center's award program with the American Council for Education supporting Technology to Internationalize (2013-14), directed the COIL Center's Stevens Initiative project in the MENA region (2016-17) and launched the State Department funded US-Mexico Multistate COIL project which linked 18 Mexican higher education institutions with 14 US campuses.

Rubin previously taught at Bard College and MIT and was Associate Professor of Film/New Media at SUNY Purchase where he developed a Cross-Cultural Video course in which SUNY students co-produced videos with students in Turkey, Russia, Mexico, Belarus, Lithuania, and Germany. His films have been shown internationally and his Floating Cinema surprised viewers at nighttime waterfront screenings in many venues in the US and abroad. He received Guggenheim, NEA, Ford and Fulbright fellowships. Recently he created COIL Consulting (coilconsult.com) to support and provide resources for universities launching their own COIL initiatives. He lives in Brooklyn, New York.

Episode Transcript:

Welcome to the Global Learning Podcast. Today's podcast supports Global Learning in the COIL Environment: How Is It Done, What Can Be Learned. This is the fourth session in the second series of NAFSA's Architecture for Global Learning, an online professional enrichment series helping faculty, scholars, and administrators strengthen their understanding of global learning and develop capacity for translating mission-driven institutional global learning goals into concrete and co-curricular experiences.

Join us February 9 from 12:00-1:00 PM for the Architecture for Global Learning series session [Global Learning in the COIL Environment: How Is It Done, What Can Be Learned](#).

Jon Rubin, Director of COIL Consulting and former Director of the State University of New York (SUNY) COIL Center presents his opinion on why Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) is becoming an important element of international education and responds to questions on initiating and meeting the challenges and benefits of a COIL course or program.

1. What is COIL and why is it becoming an important element of international education?

To frame our discussion of COIL, I want to first place it into the wider context of the present day. We live in a world where globalization is affecting us all in many ways. Where many people are forming their opinions of the world and others without authentic knowledge. So much of the information we receive is filtered and distorted that “fake news” has become one of the painful clichés of our time. No wonder so many Americans have such strained views of the world. They have never been there and they have little direct knowledge of how others think and live.

For students and faculty to transcend that noise they need to see the world for what it is - by having authentic interactions with people living in other cultures and environments. Until recently the primary way to do this was to study abroad – and that modality - when engaged with preparation and self-awareness - is still an excellent way to learn about the world.

However, very few university students, and fewer instructors than we would like, have the chance to blend study and research with travel. In the US only about 5% of all college students participate in study abroad or student exchange during their college years. In Europe, the numbers are slightly higher, but in most of the rest of the world the figure is less than 1% - as is also the case at US community colleges, historically black colleges and universities, and at many other smaller public institutions. So, what about those who do not have that mobility? We also must help them to become more cross-culturally sensitive and better global citizens, especially in the current political landscape. COIL provides an innovative and authentic pathway for our students and our instructors to interact with the world – a pathway that was not possible in the past.

COIL is short for Collaborative Online International Learning - a term for an evolving practice that I coined eleven years ago when the State University of New York (SUNY) COIL Center was launched and I was appointed director. COIL uses the internet to link the classrooms of two or more higher education institutions, each located in a different country or cultural setting. COIL creates equitable team-taught learning environments where faculty from two cultures work together to develop a shared syllabus, emphasizing experiential and collaborative student learning. By engaging innovative instructors and instructional designers as they develop joint COIL-enhanced courses, COIL can become a powerful method for internationalizing teachers and staff. These courses are embedded in the curriculum, making international education available at no additional cost to students as part of their regular university program.

While COIL began and continues to be developed at SUNY, many other higher education institutions around the world have adopted the term and the practice, as the related concepts of *global learning* and *networked education* have begun to take hold. One such institution is Florida International University, where *global learning* is defined as “the process of diverse people collaboratively analyzing and addressing complex problems that transcend borders”. FIU has a well-developed, university-wide Global Learning program, into which COIL practices are now being integrated. But unlike many other global learning practices, COIL is also a networked model of education because COIL courses cannot

exist on a single campus – they require an international partner. Developing a COIL program means understanding other approaches to teaching and learning and being responsive to them. It is at heart a bi-lateral engagement, a two-way street, all enabled by technology, but ultimately focused on enhancing human interaction across cultures.

2. What are the initial steps educators and other campus stakeholders need to take to begin the planning and implementation of a COIL program?

In our present socially networked landscape, the concept of connecting students through the internet appears simple. But without proper guidance and structure, most people utilize the internet only to interact with those like themselves. There is much research that confirms the cultural bubble which encloses most of us when we are online. So, connecting university classes that may embody different cultural and institutional approaches to teaching, learning, and grading; where different languages may be spoken; and where time zones may make synchronous sessions a challenge, requires careful planning and preparation.

Enthusiasm, flexibility, and an ability to bring together diverse campus stakeholders are important qualities for those who wish to develop and implement a COIL Program. Historically, most COIL courses were initiated by excited professors who saw the potential for bringing international students into their classrooms. But recently, as more institutions recognize the potential of this format of global learning, they must understand the complexities of online exchange and then must identify and reach out to the campus units which need to contribute. At most campuses, COIL is not solely an activity of the International Programs Office, but becomes a partnership with Academic Affairs, Instructional Design, those supporting online education, interested Deans, and other members of the community. But it is the enthusiasm of your professors that is most critical to the success of COIL work. This format cannot simply be assigned to teachers – they must truly embrace it. So COIL must be introduced as a supported initiative with opportunity for professional development – not just as an added burden.

As a COIL initiative is developed, it must be promoted on campus so that interested teachers, programs, and potential international partners can be identified. As stakeholders are brought aboard, a planning timeline should be created to support the development of a scalable and sustainable initiative over time. This all requires a dedicated leader or team with experience in coordinating instructional design, technology, and partnerships. To avoid known pitfalls, it may also make sense to draw on experts with COIL experience.

3. What are the most formidable challenges or rewarding opportunities to be expected in the establishment of a COIL course or program?

Higher education institutions are inherently conservative organizational structures. They tend to be better at researching and discussing innovation than in implementing innovation themselves. And while many large universities collaborate internationally on research, few have significant experience with intensive collaborative networking in pedagogy. So, engaging in a deep, intercultural re-examination of why and how each class does what it does, can be a potentially radical and revealing intervention for students, instructors, and staff. It allows all participants to learn from each other and to gain understanding about each other's lives. But because COIL is a true intervention, it requires visionary leadership to successfully bring to scale.

But the rewards of COILing are great and are likely to be felt by participants on all levels. For many students, it is their first experience communicating with and working with international peers. Many will likely have careers in which they must work with other nationalities or with clients or partners in other countries, often at a distance or as part of virtual teams. COIL can develop the skills needed to be successful in this emerging workplace. For professors, the experience of re-inventing a course with an international peer can stimulate them to revise and enhance other courses, can be personally rejuvenating and can lead to their publication of research based on the COIL experience and course outcomes.

COIL courses also work effectively as portals to increase student interest in study abroad and physical exchange - for students who have the time and resources to travel. COIL can also be directly integrated into mobility programs, extending what might be a short sojourn into a longer and more meaningful experience by designing COIL experiences that engage students in the visited country before, during, or after their study abroad travel.

But what excites me most about COIL is that it is an emerging format that can affect higher education broadly. For example, it need not be solely limited to international partnerships, it can be practiced regionally by building COIL bridges between institutions with differing student demographics. It thereby opens each institution to new ways of thinking, teaching - and especially to working together. There is much that we can all learn and contribute to the inclusiveness that COIL supports.

If this topic is of interest to you, please join me and my co-facilitators at the COIL workshop we will be giving at the 2018 NAFSA conference in Philadelphia on May 28.

More information:

- [Global Learning in the COIL Environment e-Seminar](#); February 9, 2018, 12:00-1:00 PM EST
- [COIL Workshop](#) with Jon Rubin at the 2018 NAFSA Annual Conference and Expo in Philadelphia, PA

Contact globallearning@nafsa.org with questions.