

10 Educational innovation in times of crisis: learner voices from the Albany-Caracas COIL exchange

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Abstract

In the digital era, where everything seems to move at the speed of light, unfortunately certain regions and countries are limited by economic, political, social, or cultural circumstances, as is the case for Venezuela. New technologies are particularly fundamental in the educational field, and every day Venezuelan students need to deal with the second worst Internet in the world (according to a study conducted by [Speedtest in 2019](#)), sporadic blackouts, a hyperinflation that makes almost impossible to upgrade equipment, and all the stress and trauma that come along. Despite these challenges, at the Andrés Bello Catholic University (UCAB), ranked number one in the country, a class of communications students were assigned a crucial task: take a joint 100% online Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) program with students from the State University of New York (SUNY) located in Albany, United States. The final product was a meta-documentary, while the real outcome was an enriching cross-cultural experience. This chapter

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complements Jiménez and Kressner's (this volume) chapter, and presents the learner voice from UCAB.

Keywords: virtual exchange, multicultural learning, transmedia, globalization, crisis.

1. Introducing the Albany-Caracas COIL Exchange

Growth, organization, experiment, multicultural, transcendental, commitment, patience, memorable, enriching, diversity, challenge, effort, progress, empathy, innovation, union, fun, engagement, surrender, communication, alliance, cooperation, novelty, enhancing, perseverance, dare, inspiration, unique, compromise, resilience.

These were the words used by the students and the professor from Caracas, Venezuela, to define what the SUNY COIL project experience meant to them. This was our transcultural and transmedia experience created from September 2019 to January 2020, between the documentary course of the Communication Department at UCAB, in Caracas, Venezuela, headed by Professor José Luis Jiménez, and the Latin American Popular Culture course at SUNY, in Albany, USA, directed by Professor Ilka Kressner. The purpose of this exchange was to develop and implement a new form of interaction and learning in the current global context.

For this project, seven groups of seven, and one group of eight students were formed, each involving half of the group members from Caracas, Venezuela, and half from New York, United States. The work dynamics consisted of intensive readings, group activities, meetings, and conversations by video call. Before and after the activities, members of each team met and discussed the task using the diverse tools offered by technology: Facebook chats, emails, Facetime, Zoom, VoiceThread, and WhatsApp. The final work of every team was the production of a ten-minute mini documentary. The theme of the documentary was the popular cultures of each respective city, in this

case, Albany and Caracas. Various audiovisual materials were collected: photographs and videos taken with smartphones and professional cameras, images of local artists, recorded interviews, audio, and music, street shots, as well as shots taken in a television studio, on both university campuses, and at houses of some participants. A final 40-minute meta-documentary was produced, containing extracts of each documentary and new material recorded during the course of the semester, which summed up the entire experience. The documentary is entitled: ‘Educational Innovation in Times of Crisis’⁵ and includes several topics: the economic, social, and political crisis that Venezuela is currently experiencing and the difficulties that this brings, Internet connection limitations, and intermittency in basic services such as electricity, combined with the challenge of establishing a communicative line between students with different realities and cultures.

The project participants faced many challenges such as Internet connectivity and poor broadband in Venezuela, which sometimes resulted in communication failures. Venezuelan students missed some meetings and delays were experienced in sending and receiving messages. There were also language issues. All students from Venezuela and most students from the USA spoke Spanish, yet New York students who did not speak Spanish participated in the activities less, and ceased to offer their collaboration and points of view. Finally, there were some disagreements in relation to cultural and generational differences, personal affairs of the students, varying levels of commitment, and surprisingly, divergent perceptions regarding popular culture, which caused the main creative clashes. Venezuela has a different sense of what art and urban music are and younger people identify more with urban music than with popular music, which caused confusion among students. Yet, the project enabled Venezuelan students to develop and understand new strategies and that multicultural encounters have a long-term impact on us. They faced and overcame the challenges and developed skills to be able to do it again. This is evidenced in the good grades that Venezuelan students managed to obtain as well as the relationships created between students in both groups.

5. The IETDC Versión IVEC documentary is publicly available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RB48fgllnr0>

2. Voices of the participants: learner testimonials

In this section, we offer our voices as UCAB learners participating in this project.

2.1. Sofia Ruiz

For this collaborative experience, we joined forces to develop, discuss, and learn about popular culture, identifying our commonalities and differences while working on the assigned readings and theories. We immersed ourselves in social interaction from a multicultural perspective and thus developed communicative skills that allow a connection of learning and intercultural and cross-cultural exchange. We experienced self-expression outside our usual zone or ‘comfort zone’. Having an experience of collaboration with students from an area, culture, and reality different from Venezuela, in the midst of an unfavorable context, allowed an even more significant academic and personal growth. We were completely immersed in the project, and this is proven in the richness of the final documentary, which, for me, is a strong reminder that limitations, in every sense, are in our mind.

In my collaborative group, there was a leader from UCAB and another from SUNY in my group, who implicitly laid the foundations for managing tasks and deadlines. Initiative and creativity were always present, so there was never a lack of ideas to nurture each task. This further enriched the exchange because it showed that we were all always willing to listen to each other and we could see the appreciation for the contributions of each member, which for the program was one of the main pillars. Everything in this journey has seemed unattainable at first, however, our tutors have supported us and taught us where to go. They encouraged us to participate in the 2020 International Virtual Exchange Conference, where we presented our documentary. This expanded the range of our vision even more because it allowed us to attend other presentations and hear other experiences.

Within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was interesting to have a virtual exchange experience because it prepared us in some way for what

was about to happen and how we would continue to communicate from that moment on.

2.2. Santiago Hernández

I embarked on COIL with mixed emotions. Living in Venezuela is most of the time energy-draining. On top of the usual unstable political and social circumstances, in 2019 there were a series of national power outages. Being a member of the youngest in the country, sometimes called generation of change (a term which I find empowering), everyday pressures were particularly distressing. When I commenced COIL, I was the busiest I had been, finishing the last semesters of my degree, while dealing with several other projects outside the campus. These left me in a state of numbness and isolation. Fortunately, I had already had the opportunity to travel abroad and know different cultures, and a couple of months before stepping on the COIL journey, I had started an online job where I was tutoring people from Asia, literally from the other side of the world. Yet the concept of globalization still felt alien: a continuous transaction at an economic and artistic level, more evident in the audiovisual content, goods, trends, and international news we consume. Little did I know COIL would be a platform to dig even deeper into the universal exploit.

During the trajectory of COIL, the big picture started to look different. For a common purpose, two groups of students from two different countries were starting to seem not so different anymore. There was a complete trade, not only of ideas, but of discrepancies and compliances, while discussing what popular culture is, the themes, and the course of action; and even more importantly, of absences from online meetings, deficiencies in the assignments, and everything related to personal affairs that reminded us that we were humans.

Through COIL, we produced a meta-documentary and exchanged culture and human consciousness. We envisaged a bright future that awaited us. A year later to our exchange, the pandemic would ruthlessly attack the entire planet and successively normalize social distancing, and therefore remote events. This would reaffirm that we live in a digital age, and is in my opinion more

alluring. It demonstrated that border is a word, and there are no barriers other than mental ones.

2.3. Alicia García

I was very excited by the idea of this project; however, I did not know if we could carry it out due to different problems we were going through as students in a country like Venezuela. Life in Venezuela is quite complicated; a big part of the population does not have access to basic services such as water, electricity, or food, and the Internet is usually very unstable. Just like Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory says, when basic needs fail, it is difficult to do more demanding activities, and 2019 was a particularly difficult year for Venezuelans, since at the beginning of the year political problems escalated, then on March 7, 2019 the largest massive blackout in the history of Venezuela happened due to a failure in the country's main hydroelectric power plant. The entire country was without electricity for five days, causing serious problems in hospitals, clinics, industries, transportation, and water services, and causing multiple looting nationwide. After that event, power failures became more frequent. In Venezuela, the quality of life of each family varies according to their purchasing power, and a large part of the population does not have the necessary resources to pay the high prices of higher education. I have poor water service that comes from Thursday to Saturday, the rest of the time we must use a tank or store water in containers. Food is more expensive every day, due to the devaluation of the official currency. Power goes out at least once a week for an hour or two. The Internet connection is unstable and slow, so I cannot be online all the time, much of the time I have to use mobile phone data. This is my reality, which is quite privileged compared to most of the Venezuelan population.

Yet, we must continue our university studies and this COIL project was one more challenge. We had to communicate by email, Facebook chat, videoconference by Zoom, and WhatsApp to carry out the evaluated activities. We had to analyze literary texts and make a collaborative mini documentary about the culture and festivities in December that we have in each country.

The COIL experience not only gave me the opportunity to interact with people from other cultures, but by giving us a challenge that we thought was impossible. It brought us closer to the new normal of online classes and digital exchange, it prepared us for the digital era of COVID-19 in 2020, and showed us that exchanges and communication for learning through a digital medium is possible even for countries like Venezuela.

2.4. Jesús Chacón

At the beginning of 2019, the Venezuelan population was left in the dark, facing an energy crisis for several days where darkness became a constant and light an exception. However, the student body had to continue with their academic activities. At the beginning of the seventh semester of social communication, specifically in the audiovisual section, I came across a call to participate in a COIL program. I was very excited to join the project despite what it took to live in a national crisis. Problems with the Internet connection made it difficult to communicate and continue with the project. However, this project, from my point of view, was the ray of hope that I needed at that time.

As students of audiovisual production, we took care of putting together the endless visual pieces to achieve footage that would explain the whole experience in the macro documentary. We were taking big steps in the Venezuelan academic area, holding virtual meetings between Venezuelan and New York students. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, we realized that the method we used to maintain contact with our New York partners for the COIL project formed the virtual academic preparation we needed to study in the new Venezuelan academic system during the pandemic.

3. Conclusions

The whole experience showed us that regardless of the apparently adverse circumstances, internationally shared academic objectives can be achieved, when working with a clear course of action and a range of alternatives. A

university from the US and one from Venezuela, working as one group, managed to overcome basic communication barriers and cultural disparities. The main mediums to carry out the project were responsibility, commitment, yearning to learn from other cultures, and resilience. Our professors played a fundamental role in offering guidance that promoted student leadership and proactivity. This experience was proof that the typical and obvious limitations can be managed by the students themselves with proper preparation. We proved that a 100% virtual international collaboration is possible.

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