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Research article

The potential of collaborative online international learning as a border thinking third space for global citizenship education

Katherine Wimpenny,^{1,*}  Lynette Jacobs,²  Mark Dawson,¹  Cornelius Hagenmeier² 

¹ Research Centre for Global Learning, Coventry University, Coventry, UK

² Office for International Affairs, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa

* Correspondence: k.wimpenny@coventry.ac.uk

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Abstract

In this article, we examine the potential of collaborative online international learning as a borderland third space for global citizenship education. Border thinking is used as a mode of critical questioning and reflection of ways of relating to the world, of feeling, acting, living and inhabiting the world that emanates from plural knowledges disrupting modernity and repositioning alternative knowledge traditions. After discussing the central concepts of collaborative online international learning and global citizenship education, and unpacking border thinking and third space as a lens, we provide four

illustrative autoethnographic vignettes from which we then discuss collaborative online international learning and global citizenship education critically. We conclude that by bringing together students to engage in a collaborative learning task that they would be unable to complete on their own, participants have a personal and collective opportunity to appreciate each other's microsocial realities better. We argue that the potential for becoming in the collective borderlands of collaborative online international learning can deepen students' learning and understanding of global citizenship education as inclusive, decolonising, Indigenising, critical and transformative. However, collaborative online international learning for global citizenship education should not be deployed uncritically as an online pedagogy, assuming inclusivity. Rather, it can be a core component of holistic learning practice, if it is deliberately used as a borderland third space where valuable learning through reflection and openness to discomfort advances a global mindset.

Keywords autoethnographic vignette; border thinking; collaborative online international learning; COIL; critical internationalisation; global citizenship education; third space

Introduction

Collaborative online international learning (COIL) is a pedagogical approach within internationalisation at home practices (IaH). IaH emphasises resources to be used at a local level in the delivery of an internationally focused curriculum for all students (Beelen and Jones, 2015). COIL typically involves the co-development of a set of tasks in a course or module by two or more academic staff from different countries, where students across borders learn together on a negotiated area of focus (Wimpenny and Orsini-Jones, 2020). Yet for COIL to engage learners in meaningful ways, and beyond promotional rhetoric (see Streitwieser and Light's (2016) critique), careful consideration of COIL design and the learning environment is required in terms of ontological and epistemological framings (for example, geopolitical, sociocultural, institutional, academic and personal).

Elsewhere, we have written about the challenge of access and inclusion issues as part of third space COIL (Wimpenny et al., 2022). Drawing on Bhabha (1994), we critically consider ways in which COIL offers a borderland third space to enable student attributes linked with global citizenship to develop. As an interruptive, interrogative space, Bhabha (1994) identifies the third space as a productive, dialogic and reflective site of learning that engenders new possibility disrupting dominant discursive constructions and inviting transformation. We suggest that COIL provides an opportunity for third space learning, for dialogue and action, for disruption, reflexivity and reflection, as 'students and academics explore their different intellectual, emotional, and socio-cultural positionings [in recognising themselves] in the narrative of the interconnected world, as well as local realities' (Niemczyk, 2019: 3).

We have been examining how COIL offers a powerful platform in which to apply third space concepts to the process of education for global citizenship. Yet we do not assume that COIL achieves all it promises. Aligning with Le Grange (2016), we suggest that COIL requires critical engagement in the learning exchange with entangled constructions with respect to difference valued for its intrinsic worth. Furthermore, and from a border thinking perspective (repositioning alternative knowledge traditions), we examine how COIL finds ways for learners to dwell in borderlands and enter new terrain, physical and otherwise, multiple and overlapping, to enable a critical questioning and reflection of ways of relating to the world, of feeling, acting, living and inhabiting the world that emanate from perspectives decentring Western hegemonies (Jacobs et al., 2022; Wolhuter and Jacobs, 2021). Border thinking is deliberately different from the thinking that feeds into the 'colonial matrix of power'; it is thinking and expressing that is defiant, informed by 'subaltern ways of doing, knowing and being', and it disrupts the colonial and territorial 'desire for hegemony and homogeneity' (Jacobs et al., 2022: 33).

University internationalisation processes aimed at transforming curriculum approaches should embrace diverse world views that do not come together in straightforward ways to enable democratic and equitable foundations for learning. As Killick (2015) highlights, the contested term of global citizenship itself creates confusion as, increasingly, literature and various taxonomies seek to (re)define

terms and global concepts of citizen. Taking a critical stance, we draw on Pashby et al.'s (2020) layers of analysis when considering global citizenship education (GCED) and what activities help to connect students' learning with local, regional and global problems. We challenge the concept of a global citizen in terms of interdependence, worldwide interconnectedness and unexamined notions of a common humanity and/or neoliberal notions of the global worker (Hammond and Keating, 2018). We recognise that assigning versions of global citizenship to a student brings into question issues of power, privilege, class and so on, reinforcing otherness (Swanson and Gamal, 2021). One can be a global citizen while simultaneously being a local citizen, with an institution that serves as a base, but not necessarily one's hometown (Rule et al., 2021). We suggest that framings, often in the hidden curriculum, of the immediate academic community and local context serve to inform the values of the global and local teaching, learning and research community helpfully or disobligingly. Andreotti (2014) has examined GCED as an elitist and Global North project, which is pertinent when considering power dynamics and the global imaginary used to drive and shape knowledge around the world and how many universities steer GCED more towards graduate futures and career possibilities (Hayden et al., 2020). Without critical interrogation of how ideologies underpin GCED, and how these inform pedagogical initiatives (Heleta and Chasi, 2022), the deeply unequal societies we live in leave personal circumstances, which significantly affect how open learners are to other ways of thinking, perilously unexamined.

In this article, as four academics in higher education borderlands, two from South Africa and two from the UK, we each recognise our own relationships and sense of closeness to the notion of borders, and how dualistic conceptions of North/South, qualitative/quantitative and Western/non-Western filter knowledge in territorial, static, linear and unproductive ways (Wimpenny et al., 2023). We recognise that we do not disconnect who we are from the intersectional borders of our personal and professional lives. We reflexively draw on autoethnographic vignettes (Humphreys, 2005) from across our practices to critique COIL through a border thinking third space lens as an opening for critical GCED.

Border thinking requires epistemic wayward and critical analysis (Wimpenny et al., 2023) by questioning principles of co-inquiry and reflection about the borders of our thinking and learning (Andreotti, 2014). We discuss if and how COIL offers an opportunity to interrupt neoliberal hegemony (see Baumvol, 2019) and open alternative global citizenship borderland third spaces for reimagining and repositioning ways of becoming, our overarching question being: What is the potential of COIL to be a borderland third space for GCED?

Informing literature

Collaborative online international learning

Online technology provides the opportunity for learning communities to collaborate without meeting physically. COIL, as part of IaH, enables universities to traverse national borders at home to facilitate valuable international experiences without relying on physical mobility which excludes many (Beelen et al., 2021).

COIL can be defined as 'a new teaching and learning approach' that is intended to 'experientially stretch students understanding of the world and their place within it' (Rubin, 2017: 76). In practice, the approach can encompass a broad range of activity that should engage each student 'locally' with their peers 'far away', emphasising networked experiential learning which is 'lean, agile and manoeuvrable', and not 'hierarchically organised' (Rubin, 2017: 78). Usually focused on degree subject-related group work, COIL activity might only occur for a limited time, and might be excluded from formal assessment processes, or it might form a core component of a module or course over an entire semester or longer. The degree to which educators actively facilitate the process can vary considerably, and students and graduates can also take on facilitator roles.

A main goal of COIL practice for critical GCED is to enable space for students to reflect on challenges in contemporary societies and how these challenges might be shared across time and place with others around the world. Through these interactions, opportunities to develop new ideas, mindsets and intercultural capabilities can arise (Rubin, 2017). COIL, thus, enables the examination of societal issues and relationships to local and national concerns. For example, the limiting impact of context-specific hegemonic forces such as language of instruction or government policy can be examined reflexively (Guimarães and Finardi, 2021), or seemingly diametrically opposed entities such

as religiously conservative Christian and Islamic communities can come into contact with each other (Dorroll and Dorroll, 2020).

COIL encourages students to pursue and persist in online learning spaces that require them to take responsibility in addressing a collaborative task they would otherwise not be able to achieve on their own (De la Garza and Maher, 2022; Wimpenny et al., 2018). It also shows particular potential with regard to addressing complex global challenges (see Adefila et al., 2021) transcending academia and their territorial drive (Mignolo and Tlostanova, 2006). Nelson and Parchoma (2018) identify the possibilities of third space learning as a beneficial space for educators seeking pedagogies for Indigenising (online) learning environments, ensuring that dominant cultures do not serve to undermine cultural processes of more marginalised peoples. Our focus on COIL as a third space is in offering ways to bring together a number of interconnected educational constructs and approaches to education for global citizenship, not least considering the complex conceptualisations of human and environmental futures. We argue that COIL can promote curiosity-led, learner-curated creativity, yet questions remain regarding how students knowingly engage in 'translation and negotiation' (Bhabha, 1994: 39) with peers, wherein learning becomes more fluid as analytical frames and multiple theories and philosophies come together in culturally hybridised ways.

The Covid-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement both reinforced the need for citizens to be able to think and work beyond disciplinary, national and sectoral borders. COIL exchanges as part of critical GCED offer scope to exchange information and collaborate with local, national and international governments, non-governmental organisations and businesses to effect change. As key societal stakeholders, universities are well situated to facilitate these kinds of multisectoral, multiscale learning opportunities. Yet navigating COIL is not straightforward, with multiple influences on equity in interaction such as social, digital, psychological and trust capital, mutuality, inclusivity and equality factors (see Wimpenny et al., 2022). These factors present possible fault lines and borders that can prevent learners from feeling safe, capable and engaged. The role of the educator/facilitator here should also not be underestimated (Reljanovic Glimäng, 2022). Appreciating how COIL exchanges are initiated by the partnering institutions also brings into question how the local and global dimensions of critical GCED serve to reinforce or challenge students' assumptions, and how new identities and social constructs compare with what came before.

COIL exchanges require both students and educators to be in a position to receive: open to considering different life experience and navigating complex, ambiguous situations that might be outside usual comfort zones. Reljanovic Glimäng (2022) mentions how collaborative projects can end hastily with students opting for safe, non-confrontational styles and topics, avoiding openly confronting social and cultural bias. COIL facilitators must be cognisant of more than just international and intercultural borders. They need to shine a light on various salient intersectional deliberations and to work not just to highlight these, but also to encourage approaches by students towards learning spaces that can act as productive sites for awareness raising and openness to exploration. An over-focus on intercultural borders may obscure other intersectional barriers present within our learning contexts, rendering them less visible or less central, for example, gender identity, ageism and neurodiversity (Dooly, 2011). To transcend some of these less visible territorial boundaries in the human lived experience, COIL as a third space seeks to engage students and academic staff to occupy the borderlands – or else 'too often border-crossing in the higher education domain is predominantly an individual choice, and an individual experience' (Jooste and Hagenmeier, 2022: 33).

Global citizenship education

GCED in higher education has previously promoted a soft conception of what a citizen of the world might be, driven by hegemonic influences, but increasingly educators have taken a more critical stance to question the legitimacy of such discourse (Andreotti, 2014). Killick (2015) questions how graduates from higher education emerge from university better equipped to engage ethically with a complex world. He contends that higher education internationalisation should enable students to re-examine their perspectives and focus on their becomings. This requires a transformative curriculum that holistically supports students in the development of their global selves (Killick, 2015). What does this mean for the reality of classroom experience, and how versions of global citizenship are translated, enacted, experienced and reflected on by students and academic colleagues in our university contexts? Gaudelli (2016: 13) suggests that global citizenship might be read as 'a person developing their identity as

rooted in a particular community but with a sense of connection, responsibility and concern for people elsewhere'. Swanson and Gamal (2021) note how citizenship has implications in terms of rights and responsibilities, duties and entitlements, and concepts that are not explicitly engaged in as part of international education. Rather, framings might superficially translate into how a global outlook is a vital attribute for future graduates as our next generation of leaders (Bothwell, 2017), with implications of developing a skill set based more on self-interest and neoliberal concepts. It is complex how one can be both global and civic when such concepts can have such different meanings (Gaudelli, 2016). Yet this can be a site of productive tension – a locus of critical reflection (Swanson and Gamal, 2021).

Stein and Andreotti (2021: 13), drawing on decolonial, postcolonial and Indigenous theories, discuss global citizenship otherwise, and an educational framework that invites Global North learners to 'decentre themselves', as well as to develop consciousness around the interrelated (human and other-than human) concepts of ecological, cognitive, affective, relational and economic justice. Moving beyond mainstream approaches and attempts to prescribe key features of what GCED should include, Stein and Andreotti (2021) discuss the importance of problematising GCED at its very roots, and the inherently harmful structures of knowing, being and relating that relate to modern/colonial thinking. Karsgaard (2019) similarly argues for reflective approaches, promoting meaningful engagements for learners, wherein discomfort is recognised to navigate and discuss differences. Harnessing such tensions is embraced within critical GCED, wherein the liberal–neoliberal approaches of instrumental and solution-based methodologies that sustain processes of knowledge production as dominant, colonial and oppressive are critiqued, challenged and made explicit.

Considering Global South perspectives, Heleta and Chasi (2022: 9–10) propose a definition of internationalisation in South Africa, highlighting the need for epistemic decolonisation and acknowledging injustices:

Internationalisation of higher education is a critical and comparative process of the study of the world and its complexities, past and present inequalities and injustices, and possibilities for a more equitable and just future for all. Through teaching, learning, research and engagement, internationalisation fosters epistemic plurality and integrates critical, anti-racist and anti-hegemonic learning about the world from diverse global perspectives to enhance the quality and relevance of education.

While Heleta and Chasi's (2022) efforts bring together positionality, criticality and plurality, and what we should be doing across our education contexts from a border thinking perspective, we are not there yet in such appreciation of one another's visions as a conscious coming together (Wimpenny et al., 2023). For example, the idea of borders relates to the inside/territory as stable, fixed and defensible, while a yardstick with the outside/wilderness resembles waywardness and being non-stratified. Unless consciously examined, the many and diverse borders of our thinking, influenced by territorial and sociological practices enacted at different scales, continue to influence and shape the concept of citizen. We see COIL exchanges taking up such examination through a critical GCED gaze not limited to a single norm of what constitutes a global citizen, but rather as inclusive, decolonising, Indigenising, critical and transformative. As part of this critique, educational practitioners need to be consciously aware of how they engage with the assumptions and implications and limitations of their own and others' pedagogical borders (Andreotti, 2014). Critical GCED through COIL thus involves dismantling or unlearning, as students recognise the contextual and historical nature of their knowledges (Andreotti, 2014).

Theoretical lens: border thinking

Border thinking is thinking from the outside, not being positioned in modernity and the yardstick thereof, using alternative knowledge traditions and alternative ways of expressing (Jacobs et al., 2022). Alternative perspectives from outside the norm introduce other ontologies and other epistemologies into the hegemonic discourse of Western modernity. But how do those in the outside authentically bring themselves into the space? Who is on the inside or at the borders? And what do we mean by borders?

Over five centuries, the Global North has become the perceived standard and source of knowledge, and how knowledge is to come about (Sajjad, 2023). Hayes (2022: 10) argues that it is 'usually Western and Eurocentric knowledge which has the capacity to constrain and contain members of society and their particular geographical contexts'. Wolhuter and Jacobs (2021: 97), resonating with Sajjad

(2023), criticise binary modernity thinking such as 'North/South; civilised/non-civilised; knowledge/myth; Western/Non-Western' that elevates 'certain epistemologies, and ways of being and doing while others are devalued'. Mignolo (2018: 5 and 3) alludes to dimensions of otherness that touch:

the lives of men and women of colour, gays and lesbians, people and languages of the non-European/US world ... Border Thinking/decoloniality is concerned with global equality and economic justice, but it also asserts that Western democracy and socialism are not the only two models to orient our thinking and our doing. Decolonial arguments promote the communal as another option next to capitalism and communism.

Yet, in their study, Jacobs et al. (2022: 42) found that those from the Global South who do wander into territorial Global North spaces, or who engage with those who enter the borderlands from this territory, have often accepted the Western epistemology, and they do not give enough thought to dissemination and transferring ontology and epistemology from the outside. Crossing borders needs deliberateness and awareness to allow conscious delinking from the modern/colonial world towards 'epistemic disobedience' (Sajjad, 2023: 2). Otherwise, those meandering the borderland simply use 'knowledge, categories, language and systems of the modern/colonial world' (Sajjad, 2023: 7) or, as Mignolo (2018: 4) shares, are 'chained to the illusion that there is no other way of thinking, doing and living'.

We do not interpret border as being limited to geopolitical borders; rather, the boundaries and barriers that cause some to be centred are scrutinised; that is, the territory where power is based, while some remain othered – what we call the 'outside'. The borderland is where those from outside meet those from the territory, and where awareness emerges, where consciousness develops and is potentially transformed. Still, Jacobs et al. (2022: 42) warn that 'different ontologies and epistemologies should not be "othered" and treated as oddities/exotic, or remain on the social level, with little influence on scholarly activity.' The coming together should be based on being equally worthy and equally valued.

Drawing on Stein and Andreotti's (2021) GCED, we suggest that otherwise framings require progressive and transformational pedagogies such as COIL, guided by principles of mutuality and reciprocity. COIL as a borderland third space presents ways of learning which develop learners' capacity to face and embrace complexities, uncertainty, paradoxes and internal contradictions. The exchange lends itself to recognition and inclusion of multiple wisdoms, learnings, philosophies, culture practices and economic relationships. We also contend that COIL offers the opportunity and potential to be a border-dwelling third space in which traditional notions of border may prove less salient than those based on professional or individual identity (Dooly, 2011). King de Ramirez (2021) shares how engaging in COIL clarified misconceptions and prejudices and fostered global citizenship. Yet we cannot assume that such learning always happens, for whom and in what ways.

Illustrative perspectives

In what follows, we share four illustrative autoethnographic vignettes (Humphreys, 2005). The task we set ourselves was to provide a short description (about 500 words) of a COIL exchange as part method and part text of a personal short story within the social context in which it occurred (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). Our intention was to offer identification and understanding about our engagement in COIL to enable the reader to examine it as an autoethnographic window into our world (Humphreys, 2005). We then reflexively discuss how these vignettes were both able to open up COIL as a third space borderland and how they were constrained in this endeavour.

iKudu

Based on long-standing collaboration in other projects, academics and practitioners conceptualised the iKudu project, which aspired to integrate COIL in renewed, transformed and internationalised curricula. The project also strove to develop a comprehensive internationalisation approach from which all students can benefit equally. A consortium of 10 South African and European universities, coordinated by a South African university, secured funding from the Erasmus+ framework Capacity Building (Higher Education).

The iKudu project was based on the foundational values of equality, trust, Ubuntu (recognising that we are, because of others, signifying solidarity) and mutuality (Jacobs et al., 2021). It aimed to co-create

knowledge and provide international exposure for all students involved. The project stakeholders appreciated the importance of leveraging the skill and knowledge of participants across the partner universities, while providing space for epistemic diversity that accommodates the rich convictions of its stakeholders.

The conceptual reference point of iKudu was that mobility cannot meaningfully internationalise undergraduate studies in South Africa due to the prohibitive cost of travel to other world regions and because many South African students are first-generation students and hail from marginalised groups. Meanwhile, a ruptured society which struggles to overcome a violent past adds urgency to developing a pedagogy that fosters a deep understanding of cultural identity and local context which enables agency and skill to navigate a complex and multifaceted world characterised by unequal power relations. Another dimension to consider was the colonial legacy of the South African higher education system (Jooste and Hagenmeier, 2022, and the impact of a bias towards engagement with the Global North in the countries' internationalisation process (Heleta and Chasi, 2022).

The consortium strove to integrate COIL in a renewed curriculum that overcomes coloniality, develops graduates who are independent and critical thinkers and draws ways of knowing and being Indigenous to societies in which the project's partner universities are embedded. The inclusive process, which leveraged engagement with a cross-section of university stakeholders, focused on developing principles for curriculum renewal from which partners could borrow intelligently. Central to the approach was that critical internationalisation is understood as a process that connects multiple knowledge nodes and advances pluriform perspectives.

Despite the limitations of the funding framework, which was developed in the capacity-building paradigm that is based on the notion that Europeans should train non-Europeans, it was possible to find ways of developing equal collaboration in the consortium (DeWinter and Klamer, 2021). One of the central iKudu principles was striving for a balance in collaboration, sharing core functions in the project across South African and European partners and using skills and insight of all academics. The collaborations in the project became COILs themselves as tasks partners approached jointly and online, with each contributor bringing unique knowledge to complete the tasks. South African academics were among those who delivered online training, and European academics were among those who benefited from the training.

The project affirmed the pedagogies, methodologies and ideas of those based at South African universities. Nevertheless, one may critically ask on which side of the border those are located. A binary approach that considers members of a South African university to be on the other side of the border from those in Europe would be an oversimplification and unhelpful. South African society is deeply divided, and many members of university communities hail from privileged backgrounds. Many have multilayered identities. Consider, for example, the positionality of a scholar from a South African rural community who studied mostly at universities in the Global North. South African university communities may best be described as complex, diverse borderland spaces. The example of the iKudu project highlights the complexity of implementing third space COIL in the borderlands. While the iKudu project created borderlands through the equal participation of those located at the South African partner universities, care had to be taken not to assume that the strong position of South Africans in the project automatically resulted in the project broadly incorporating views from the 'other' side, or wilderness. Rather, the project incorporated and amplified the diversity of perspectives found in borderlands. Through its reflective, inclusive approach, iKudu constantly considered the paradigms within which it operated and developed new approaches to inclusive, comprehensive internationalisation, which connects globally through third space COIL.

Virtual engagement to foster cross-cultural communication and leadership skills

Scholars from three universities in three diverse countries (the USA, South Africa and Russia) across distinct cultures, disciplines and contexts collaborated to develop a GCED learning programme using COIL, with the aim of advancing transversal skills and intercultural competences. The impetus was not only to foster a deeper understanding of diversity and overcome prejudices, but also, specifically at grass-roots level, to raise awareness and develop consciousness of what connects people as humans in spite of ideological and political divides (Howard et al., 2023).

Four stand-alone modules were developed, focusing on: (1) cross-cultural communication; (2) leadership in the international online environment; (3) advancing sustainable development through online international learning; and (4) digital skills. For each of these, content was built on a shared learning management system (some still in progress), and a series of activities, including personal reflections and group projects, scaffolded the learning and engagements.

It is noteworthy how different strengths of individuals and groups contributed to success. For instance, the academic from Russia naturally took the lead in terms of instructional design on the shared online learning platform, while the colleague from the USA used her online teaching skills to facilitate the synchronous meetings. Shifting dynamics in the groups were noted. US students tended to be very focused on the project itself towards achieving good marks, and that provided the impetus and momentum. The South African students' more communal mindset came in as a strength to reach out across the divides, together with their linguistic capital to deal with languages other than English. Furthermore, the South African students' comfort in dealing with uncertainty and even chaos made them reach out to the Russian students, who were mostly younger and had to cope with learning and communicating in a foreign language. The Russian students contributed their digital and innovation skills, which resulted in high retention. The braveness of Russian students to speak in English was encouraged and applauded. The other students used online translation to try to communicate basic phrases in Russian.

It was important for the facilitators to allow for discomfort and silences during the synchronous meetings towards discovery of agency within students. They did not intervene in the dynamics of the groups, and yet they ensured that there were regular debriefing opportunities within the local institutional groups. It became evident that the students developed empathy and compassion for the other, resilience in the face of challenges, an awareness of global challenges though the real-life project problems, responsibility to contribute to the common good on a microlevel (that is, the group) and respect for diverse cultures, languages, perspectives and ways of doing. They also experienced the joy of learning together.

In current times, it is perhaps controversial to include this project in the article, and some of the authors expressed their discomfort, considering the ongoing war in Ukraine after the Russian invasion. Yet we acknowledge that COIL as part of critical GCED is about border-dwelling discomfort which recognises and embraces tensions. As Howard et al. (2023) argue, it is an opportune time to consider our own ability to navigate complexities of ideological and epistemic diversity, in particular during times of conflict.

#3CityLink

#3CityLink involved fine arts researchers, artists and students (second and third year) across three cities: Regina, Canada; Coventry, UK; and Gyumri, Armenia (each city struggling with past issues, including colonisation, devastation caused by war and natural disasters). The COIL exchange presented a platform for translocal (approaching the concept of global through local-to-local) creative interactions, questioning the role of the artist in building new and alternative narratives, revealing lost histories and imagining the future of where they live using a combination of online, screen-based media and on-the-ground dialogues.

The #3CityLink project placed students in a spatial-temporal process, bringing together 'an agentic assemblage of diverse elements [as borders] that are constantly inter-acting, never stable, never the same' (Lather and St. Pierre, 2013: 630). As such, participants' respective ideas and creativity across regions as borders required artists and art students to focus on artworks not directly related to what they personally wanted to explore, but as a collaborative group task, which was experienced as disquieting, disruptive and uncomfortable. COIL was developed as a means to produce collaborative artworks as a study in progress in third space borderlands. Rather than focusing on individual finished pieces, students had to accept their work as being incomplete. For some, this presented as a restriction on what they wanted to do, with perceptions of what should and should not go into an art exhibition being challenged. Challenging mindsets through surfacing students' perceptions encouraged the meeting of minds and brought tensions that border-dwelling and border-crossing reflect.

#3CityLink disrupted learning and 'fostered a migration of thinking, interdisciplinarity, [and] intercultural communication ... to advance [students'] lived experiences' (Wimpenny et al., 2022: 41).

Despite the technical challenges of seeing and hearing one another that were experienced at times, key findings highlighted students' insights into what they wanted to go on to do, as well as things about themselves that they wanted to change:

Don't be afraid to make contact with the overseas students; throw yourself into it. Experiment and think outside the box; let yourself get inspired. Get involved; push more. (Coventry)

Don't gloss over the idea of translocal communication – it is the unexpressed point of the project; Embrace the cultural differences offered freely by collaborators abroad – anything strange is an opportunity to learn and broaden one's horizons. (Regina)

In relation to the quality of the art produced, staff commented that there were high levels of praise for the work of students at all sites, and that the quality of work produced was higher than would have been produced in a traditional fine art studio. It was suggested that this was in response to the change in the learning context, the perceived value of students producing work for an exhibition, and the outward face of the gallery raising students' ambition. However, more can perhaps be said here in terms of how the learning prompted ways for the students and staff with community artists to reposition themselves as a means to challenge as well as to expand border freedoms and media borders. #3CityLink was about experimentation in translocal citizenship learning. It was learning willing to be open to possibility, to be untethered to any one framing or ideological viewpoint. In some ways, all those involved were questioning how to bring themselves authentically into the borderlands, and to manage their own and one another's expectations. Key learning included the importance of how staff facilitated and prepared students for such third space border thinking, with awareness of which 'side' students dwell, whether chosen or delineated, with the importance of 'living with the possibilities for being otherwise' (Grosz, 2011: 78).

Coventry–Singapore COIL

For a number of years, two cohorts of internationally heterogeneous master's students studying design in Coventry or Singapore have engaged in a COIL activity. The activity required students to reflect on their own national and local contexts, and how these intersected with international trends. Focus groups with these students revealed how enthusiastically they engaged with one another's cultures and perspectives, including comments that expressed surprise that 'they' were just like 'us'. 'They' here was viewed largely as an expression of national or cultural identity, with 'us' largely a conception of shared 'professional' characteristics. It is not surprising to find that students who aspire to join a global design industry share similar emergent professional identities, when all are subject to the dominant, hegemonic influences of capitalism and its need for productive workers (Hammond and Keating, 2018). However, to what extent the global, professional skills being developed were inclusive of local needs, desires and creativity, and thus contributed to greater equity or sustainability, is worth considering. Andreotti (2014) might note that this sounds like soft GCED, rather than critical GCED that moves to challenge inequality in the world. But there is hope here too. Andreotti (2014) notes that soft GCED can act as an intermediary towards more critical GCED. Students spoke about how proud they were to share stories from home and think of how local ideas might be incorporated into global design concepts. This hints at an emerging third space that would be recognised by Bhabha (1994) as a site of hybridity – a blending of local and global influences at the borderland where global capitalism meets local preferences, desires and needs: a potential fertile ground where critical reflections can germinate and grow. In this context, COIL can be seen as a way to help students transcend geopolitical borders to develop shared conceptions of professional identity, while also sowing the seeds for how this identity might evolve into something more open and diverse than dominant privileged discourses. There is more to be done to develop higher education practice that supports humanity in moving towards a more just future, but COIL practice done well can serve as an example for how borders (real and imagined) that serve to divide or contain might be approached and blurred, to create the sort of third spaces from which catalysts of real change might emerge.

Discussion

Our autoethnographic vignettes have uncovered and served to illuminate the ways in which COIL sets up the border thinking third space for GCED, but critical to this is the positionality of the COIL paradigm.

The borderland paradigm tells us that it would be necessary to look from the outside in. In other words, we would have to use the paradigms of African, First People and Indigenous Peoples to engage with the Global North. Yet COIL was created in the Northern paradigm, and it is rooted in Northern epistemology. Of note also is how those engaging in COIL from the Global South may well be trained in education systems that were conceptualised in the Global North, acculturated in a Northern academic culture. Arguably, those working on COIL in South Africa, for example, are in reality dwellers on the border of the Northern territory, that is, academics similarly rooted in Northern epistemology who have migrated to ways of Northern thinking and doing. What we can achieve is to embed cultural and epistemic sensitivity in the approach we take. We could use COIL as a communication channel with those epistemically Indigenous to the South to amplify their voices and engage with the North in a more intensive, co-creation process. Thus, COIL pedagogy for critical GCED offers the potential to connect Indigenous communities with the world, including those who inhabit other borderlands (for example, connecting African and South American Indigenous communities). We therefore have to remain self-critical in the use of a way of connecting knowledge conceptualised on the Northern side of the border as a means of communication. Otherwise, in spite of best intentions, COIL produces yet another colonial dynamic and rhetoric in terms of critical GCED challenging stereotypes of subaltern populations.

It is difficult to determine the extent to which iKudu is integrating the epistemology of the exteriority to which Mignolo and Tlostanova (2006) refer with regard to renewed curricula, including COIL exchanges therein. Engaging beyond the focus on geographical borders, the project was characterised by multilayered leadership structures, and it encouraged pluriform perspectives. It respects the academic freedom of those participating in its activities to shape the pedagogies used in their classrooms. While it advances a critical GCED approach to COIL, its stakeholders incorporate diverse theoretical and practical approaches in their COIL practice. Further research should be conducted to fully understand the extent to which all iKudu COILs succeed in providing the third space described by Wimpenny et al. (2022). However, the preliminary review of student reports and stakeholder perceptions indicates that COIL activities are providing an important space for cultural and intellectual cross-fertilisation.

#3CityLink highlighted students' wariness of entering the borderlands and the possibility of crossing borders. What such borders included when tasked with culturally connecting and working collaboratively with peers' experiences across three cities were:

- cross-disciplinary perspectives (fine art, illustration and film studies)
- assessment genres (a shared piece of work versus individual effort)
- the idea of a physical local, while simultaneously being an international online gallery
- collaboration with community artists
- being open to embrace communal thinking as a counterforce to the neoliberal space (Andreotti, 2014).

Yet, post the exchange, students' dispositions towards cultural openness changed as they reflected on acknowledging their 'plurality of differences within a fundamental sameness' (Gaudelli, 2016: 41). #3CityLink arguably served to disrupt learning at least to foster a migration of thinking.

As noted in the COILs engaging the USA, South Africa and Russia, and in the Coventry–Singapore exchange, the focus was on exploring and connecting students via their local realities in spite of cultural and/or political divides, as well as on promoting ways to share pluriform perspectives. In recent times, prominent thinkers in the internationalisation of higher education such as Leask (2020) and De Wit and Altbach (2021) have challenged higher education to reorient towards the so-called 'third mission' and to recognise the capital and funds of knowledge in local communities for positive change in society. This is not an easy challenge as part of GCED. Students pragmatically focus on (and are embedded within) a perceived meritocracy that values professional skills (Watkins and Smith, 2018) derived from dominant global neoliberal, sociopolitical realities; they thus need encouragement to engage critically with local to global matters. Perhaps the real borderlands and future potential for COIL GCED practice lie less across distant horizons and are to be found more in the immediate hinterland of the university. By engaging with local communities in ways unrelated to gains in personal capital (literal or cultural), students could act as linking conduits through COIL, extending the benefits of critical GCED beyond the limiting borders of ivory towers. While there is undoubtedly value to be found in projects that reach across international borders, intersectional borders of health, wealth and educational attainment, to name a few, remain relatively unexplored. If higher education is to play its part in addressing some of the wicked problems

that face humanity, simply churning out more workers for the global consumer culture will not be enough. COIL for critical GCED, combined with service-learning and outreach elements, could help universities rediscover their link with local communities, helping to traverse some of these remaining borders and creating fertile third spaces for new growth and human potential.

Border thinking is focused on the plurality of what learners find in the space that offers opportunity for deep and sustained learning. That said, we recognise how educators may do all they can to design COILs for GCED which promote other ways of being, doing, expressing and knowing, but they cannot force the students to engage (deeply). Temporal dimensions are of note here with regard to students spending enough time to be in the borderlands. As identified in #3CityLink, it was only through students being encouraged to reflect consciously on the purpose of the project, following the intense COIL exchange, that students appreciated the opportunity they had experienced in challenging and broadening their horizons as the unexpressed point of the project.

Conclusion

We have considered ways in which COIL offers a borderland third space for learners to (re)position ways of becoming as global citizens. In bringing together our autobiographical vignettes, we have offered representational, multilayered text to examine reflexively what we are learning about COIL for critical GCED across our educational contexts.

We contend that COIL should not be deployed simply as an online pedagogy, trimmed to fit convenient models and practices which claim to represent inclusivity through shallow intercultural contact (Gaudelli, 2016). Rather, COIL should form a core component of students' curriculum as an integrated, pluralistic learning practice.

As noted, COIL is, and can be, challenging for all stakeholders concerned, not only in taking both participants out of their comfort zone, but also in disrupting expectations of what learning in higher education is about. Designing and facilitating COIL as part of critical GCED thus require due care and consideration, not only vis-à-vis the pedagogical approaches to be considered for meaningful learning gain, but also through participants' self-critical reflection as part of consciousness raising. Being open to share and/or reorient thinking in ways to connect knowledge often requires uncomfortable introspection and deliberation. The potential of COIL for critical GCED through a border thinking third space lens lies in how we question our values, perspectives, concerns and vulnerabilities, not least in how these relate to the values and approaches adopted by our universities, and the challenging education and societal contexts in which we live, study and work.

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Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Ethical approval has been granted to the studies from which the vignettes were shared. The authors have followed ethical guidelines as outlined by the South African Studies and British Educational Research Association and the General Data Protection Regulations.

Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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