RESEARCH ARTICLE:

Reflections of an Early Career Academic on their Experience of Running a COIL Project

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Abstract

This paper draws on Rolfe, Freshwater and Jasper's (2001) framework of reflective writing, to reflect on an early career academic's experience of embedding a Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) project in a General Education module at a University of Technology (UoT). COIL is a pedagogical tool that seeks to deepen students' global engagement, while promoting intercultural competence. Cornerstone 101 (CSTN101) is one of 44 General Education modules offered at this UOT. It is a compulsory module for all first-year students. Whereas there are various COIL projects that are run at this UoT, this was the first time a project of this nature ran in the Centre that services the CSTN101 module. 89 CSTN101 students that form the part-time class participated in this project. The 7-week long COIL project titled "Literature for Change: Envisioning Sustainable Futures" was a collaboration between three modules in two universities – a university in the United States of America, New York and the University of Technology in South Africa. In this international virtual exchange project, students worked together to imagine change by analysing a work of literature that proposes a present or future society of collective human thriving. Using interpretivist phenomenological analysis and drawing on critical reflection as a methodology, I employ Rolfe et al. (2001) as a framework I reflect on my experiences of having run a COIL project as an early career academic for the first time. I explore what my key learnings were, and how this learning will be implemented in future COIL projects that I engaged in.

Keywords: *early career academic; internationalisation; reflection; teaching and learning*

Introduction

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) is an innovative approach that fosters meaningful learning amongst students and staff with different linguacultural backgrounds in the online environment (Naicker *et al*., 2022). It is a pedagogical tool that seeks to deepen students' global engagement (de Castro *et al*., 2019), while promoting intercultural competence (Appiah-Kubi and Annan, 2020). COIL is an innovative approach that fosters meaningful learning amongst students and staff with different linguacultural backgrounds in the online environment (Naicker *et al*., 2022). It is a pedagogical tool that seeks to deepen students' global engagement (de Castro *et al*., 2019), while promoting intercultural competence (Appiah-Kubi and Annan, 2020). In this paper I use critical reflection as a methodological approach and draw on Rolfe *et al*. (2001) framework of reflective writing, to reflect on my experiences as an early career academic of embedding a COIL project in a General Education module at the University of Technology (UoT). The interpretivist phenomenological approach is drawn on to ground my reflections. Schön (1999) suggests that reflective practice for professionals is a continuous learning process that involves practitioners' coming into the awareness of their knowledge and learning from their experiences. A distinction is made between 'reflection-in-action' (reflecting during the process) and 'reflection-on-action' (reflecting after the process). This paper uses the latter form of reflection by looking at how the COIL project was designed and is run in retrospect (Schön, 1999).

The University of Technology became the first African university to join the Global Network Partner in the State University of New York (SUNY) COIL system in 2015. This is in-line with the university's strategic plan that includes

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the internationalisation of the institution (Bauk, 2019). This is also in-line with the national Department of Higher Education and Training's (DHET) internationalisation at home's approach (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2017). An overview of the literature on COIL reveals that not much research has been conducted on the experiences of academics who run COIL projects. Instead, research on COIL mostly focuses on the students' experiences (e.g., Vahed and Rodriguez, 2021; Naicker *et al.*, 2022). As such, this paper provides a unique perspective by focusing on an academic's experience providing valuable insight in this regard. Due to the paucity of literature on this aspect, it makes it difficult to interpret this experience in relation to findings from elsewhere. As such, this paper makes an important first contribution to this body of research. This is in-line with this journal's special issue which focuses on envisioning critical futures for Higher Education, and as such this paper explores what early career academics need to learn, unlearn, and relearn as they engage in COIL projects. An overview of literature on early career academics shows that research conducted on experience of early career academics is quite broad (e.g., Hollywood *et al.*, 2020). Not much research is found that details early career academics' experiences of embedding COIL projects. As such, this paper provides valuable insight on this specific experience of an early career academics and provides a springboard from which further research may be conducted.

Cornerstone 101 (CSTN101) is a compulsory general education module for all first-year students enrolled at the UoT, and it is the module in which this COIL project was embedded. CSTN101 is strongly rooted in transformative learning pedagogy (Ramsuroop, 2020). Transformative learning is defined as a unique form of metacognitive reasoning for adult learners. It is a type of learning that alters pre-existing frames of reference, such as fixed assumptions, making these assumptions more inclusive and reflective (Mezirow, 2003). The module purposely uses a transformative learning pedagogy to provide students with an opportunity to critically engage with contemporary issues and debates, and to reflect on issues of citizenship and social justice. Therefore, the goals of CSTN101 include helping students to develop critical thinking and values, understand traditions, respect diverse cultures and opinions and, most importantly, put that knowledge to use (Ramsuroop, 2020). This paper provides a unique perspective on curriculum innovation, a key feature of this journal's special issue, by exploring the experiences of embedding COIL as a pedagogical approach in a module that uses transformative learning.

COIL as a Pedagogical Tool at the Durban University of Technology

COIL projects generally run for a specified duration, usually lasting anything from 4-8 weeks to a semester-long. The main purpose of these projects is to ensure that students develop into global thinkers as they work collaborative on an assigned project with peers from different backgrounds (Appiah-Kubi and Annan, 2020). This develops students' intercultural competence as, through working in culturally diverse groups, they acquire cross-cultural skills and cultural sensitivity (Ceo-Francesco and Bender-Slack, 2016). This speaks directly to the fourth UoT graduate attribute that states that the institution aims to develop students that are "culturally, environmentally and socially aware within a local and global context" (Durban University of Technology, 2022). In addition, this also supports the second aim of General Education at the UoT, which states that the institution aims to "prepare students for an increasingly diverse and complex globalised work environment" (General Education Task Team, 2012).

COIL projects may be developed within and between academic disciplines, with the aim of facilitating learning opportunities that would otherwise not be available in a single-country learning setting (de Castro *et al.*, 2019). Through COIL culturally diverse academics collaborate to develop a shared syllabus (Vahed and Rodriguez, 2021). The partnership in COIL project that is the subject matter of this paper was a collaborative effort between three different disciplines (literature, history, and the humanities) across three modules in two institutions in South Africa and the United States of America. COIL differs from other forms of online learning in five ways. Firstly, it involves academic members of staff from different institutions in different countries coming together to co-create a project. This co-creation includes co-teaching and co-managing the project over a specified duration of time. Secondly, although students in the different countries participate in this project, they remain enrolled in their own institutions and subsequently are awarded credit there. Linked to this, thirdly, the students are evaluated and subsequently graded by their own lecturers in their home institution. This allows for the different staff involved in the project to define a unique set of learning outcomes for their students. Fourthly, COIL allows for students to be engaged in highly interactive and shared problem-solving learning activities with their international partners. Lastly, communication and learning for the project use technology that is easily accessible for all students (de Castro *et al.*, 2019). COIL is a sustainable option to attain internationalisation (Naicker *et al.*, 2022), which necessitates the importance of researching its impact as a pedagogy.

At the University of Technology (UoT) COIL is conceptualised as being rooted in epistemic justice and Southern Theory. Southern Theory is a growing school of thought that centers the Global South in discussions about theories and research methods (Connell, 2020). This contrasts with the dominant Eurocentric hegemony in most of the world, including the formerly colonised regions of the Global South, in terms of education and knowledge production. Maistry and Lortan (2017) argue that the primary function of universities is the production and dissemination of knowledge whilst simultaneously raising several issues. These issues include what constitutes knowledge, why some forms of knowledge are valued more than others, for whom is the knowledge being produced, and what is the social impact of this production of knowledge. These are pertinent epistemic issues in need of address. The internationalisation of higher education at the UoT is focused on curriculum transformation via internationalisation and decolonisation. The institutional strategy includes internationalisation as a component with the intention of fostering institutional change and intellectual expansion. Along with this, the UoT's internationalisation operations and goals are framed by the internationalisation strategic framework. The strategy's goals are to support and pursue inclusivity, mutuality, and diversity as well as to create and achieve social justice in higher education through international virtual engagement (IVE). Activities like COIL at the UoT seek to foster internationalisation and decolonisation of the curriculum. These are directed by the strategic framework to guarantee that curriculum evaluation is done with deliberate inclusion of historically marginalised viewpoints from all over the world. Furthermore, local knowledge is transferred to the global stage through transnational virtual interaction like COIL. As the founder and leader of COIL in Africa, the UoT wants to deepen engagement and collaboration of this kind within its own worldwide network and boost staff and student involvement in this approach to internationalisation, teaching, and learning.

General education is a collection of experiences that institutions craft, that aims to provide students with a broad knowledge base and a breadth of experiences (Bourke *et al*., 2009). It strives for the development of well-rounded students, therefore reaching beyond the classroom and looking at students' experiences holistically (Bourke *et al*., 2009). At the University of Technology (UoT), general education is primarily defined as being grounded in people's daily lives with its goals being to develop students who are critical thinkers and can successfully navigate diverse social contexts and interactions (General Education Task Team, 2012). Having been introduced in 2012 as part of the curriculum renewal process (Ramsuroop, 2020), general education takes on a humanistic perspective, incorporating issues of social justice (General Education Task Team, 2012). Although there are various COIL projects that are run at the UoT (Bauk, 2019), this paper focuses on the first time that a COIL project was run in the Centre. The Center's main aim is to make sure that the concepts and philosophy that underpin General Education at the UoT are fully realized. This Centre services the CSTN101 module, which the COIL project was embedded. The COIL project title Literature for Change: Envisioning Sustainable Futures is a collaboration between three modules in two institutions; a university from the United States of America, and the University of Technology from South Africa.

The Phenomenological Approach and Critical Reflections

The phenomenological research approach, emanating from psychology and philosophy, is concerned with synthesising the experiences of individuals who have experiences the same phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). It does this by looking at people's subjective responses of their lived experiences (Brocki and Wearden, 2006), through providing a rich description of what the persons have experienced and how they have experienced it (Creswell, 2007). Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a qualitative research approach that seeks to examine people's lived experiences, and how they make sense of them. It allows for reflection on these experiences fully, without any distortions (Alase, 2017). IPA moves beyond description and interprets the meaning of these lived experiences (Creswell, 2013) and is concerned with understanding and interpreting of the phenomenon that is investigated using the lenses of participants. Based on the notion that human beings are not merely passive perceivers of reality, IPA seeks understand people's personal and social experiences and what these mean to those people who experience them (Brocki and Wearden, 2006). This study uses IPA as the basis for enquiry because it seeks to report in detail as well as interpret my lived experience of embedding a COIL project for the first time, as an early career academic.

This paper uses critical reflection as a research method (Fook, 2011). Many understandings of critical reflection exist (Brookfield, 2009); however, this paper defines critical reflection as an overall process of learning from and reworking experience (Fook, 2011). Critical reflection is concerned with the reasons for and consequences of actions (Karlovic, 1992). As a higher-order mental process reflection encourages one to become aware of

previously held ideas, opening to new ideas (Holmes, 2015). As a research method, critical reflection is used in qualitative studies to explore "participants' internal dialogues and analyse their thought processes" (Mohan, 2020: 19). Using critical reflection as a research method entails beginning the process with participants sharing their stories and presenting their experiences. This reflection may bring about a sense of awareness, which may be used in devising new and better approaches to practice moving forward (Fook, 2011).

To operationalize this, this paper draws on Rolfe *et al*. (2001) framework of reflective writing, using critical reflection as a research method to explore my experiences of being involved in my first COIL project as an early career academic. This framework is detailed below. Critical reflection in research is transformative in nature as it may lead to changes that can be fundamental and empowering, individually and/or socially (Fook, 2011). For this study, through engaging in the process of critical reflection, I considered how my experience may influence how I approach embedding a COIL project in a module that I teach moving forward. Additionally, the authors considered how COIL may be used a transformative pedagogical approach moving forward. This paper solely focuses on my personal experiences, and therefore no ethical approval was required to write up my reflections. One of the limitations of this is that I did not collect data from my students to check whether we shared similar experiences. As such, in a subsequent COIL project I ran a year later I sought ethical approval to use students' reflections for research purposes.

Rolfe et al's (2001) Framework

This paper uses Rolfe *et al.'s* (2001: 1) framework of reflection to ground my reflection on my experience as an early career academic in running my first COIL project, and the first COIL project in the Centre that I am employed in. I describe myself as an early career academic because I have less than 10 years of formal university teaching and I have recently (2020) obtained my PhD. Rolfe *et al*.'s (2001: 1) framework is based on three questions, namely: What? So, what? Now what? This chapter is centred around trying to answer these three questions. The first step of the reflective framework (the 'What'?) sets the scene through providing an overall description of the context. The second step (the 'So what'?) draws on my experiences, detailing what happened when I was involved in the conceptualisation and teaching of the COIL project in question. It also involves taking a deeper look into this process, analysing what was relevant and interesting and providing explanations with the use of supporting evidence. During this step, there is an exploration of the challenges that I experienced and how these impacted the delivery of the COIL project. The third and final step of the reflective framework (the 'Now what'?) involves detailing my key learnings, linking practice to theory. During this step, I also propose recommendations and provide information on how these can be practically applied.

What?

The section that follows describes how the COIL project was conceptualised and subsequently ran. The COIL project titled "Literature for Change: Envisioning Sustainable Futures" was a collaboration between three modules in two institutions. These modules were Introduction to United States Literature (ENG 333) and Black History I (BLK 20) from a university in the United States of America (USA), and Cornerstone 101 (CSTN101) for the University of Technology in South Africa. As CSTN101 is a compulsory module for all first-time entering students in undergraduate studies (Ramsuroop, 2020) it attracts a large number of students. For example, during the first semester of 2022 a total of 5838 students were enrolled in the full-time class. It is difficult to run a COIL project with such large numbers as it becomes difficult to find a partner institution with similar numbers in their modules. Due to the challenge of having large numbers in the module, the part-time class for CSTN101 was selected for the COIL project as the class had fewer numbers (a total of 179).

A total number of approximately 150 students participated in this COIL project. This comprised of approximately 60 students from the two modules in the USA and approximately 90 students enrolled in CSTN101. The 150 students were mixed grouped into 17 groups of approximately 8 students per group. The students were grouped according to which of the four prescribed texts for the project they wished to work on. The four prescribed texts in question were: Ursula Le Guin, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" (short story); Audre Lorde, "Poetry is not a Luxury" and "Coal" (personal essay and poem); Danez Smith, "dear white america" and "summer, somewhere" or other selections (poems/spoken word); and Robert Hayden, "Frederick Douglass" (poem). The texts formed part of the ENG 333 syllabus. Eight of the 17 groups consisted of students from the ENG 333 and CSTN101 modules and nine of the groups consisted of students from the BLK 20 and CSTN101 module. Therefore, although this was one COIL project that was running, each module in the USA opted to independently run their

own COIL groups to avoid confusion on the part of their students. This meant that for me it felt as though I was running two COIL projects as I had to maintain communication with both USA colleagues. Unfortunately, not all 179 CSTN101 enrolled students could participate in the COIL project, as the USA partners felt that it would be overwhelming to work with all students. The students that did not participate in the project continued to follow the normal syllabus for CSTN101. This meant that it felt like I was doing triple the amount of work I would normally do in this module, as added to feeling like I was running two COIL projects I still had to continue the normal facilitation of the CSTN101 module to the rest of the students.

At the beginning of the COIL project all the students enrolled in the three modules were sent a questionnaire via Google Documents. This questionnaire was designed by one of the lecturers from the USA, and all three lecturers involved in the COIL project were tasked with sharing the link with their students. This questionnaire sought to gauge the students' understanding of COIL and intercultural competence. Within this questionnaire students were also asked to rank the four texts that they would be working on according to their preference. Unfortunately, only about 90 students enrolled in CSTN101 completed this questionnaire and it was this group of students that then subsequently completed the COIL project. The rest of the students who did not complete the questionnaire continued with the syllabus of the module. The students who were not participating in the COIL project were however invited to all the synchronous engagements as observers, so that they could get a sense of what the other half of the class was engaged in. This COIL project ran during the first semester of 2022, beginning in March and ending in May. This spanned a total of seven weeks, which is in-line with the average duration of a COIL project (Appiah-Kubi and Annan, 2020). It had a balance of synchronous and asynchronous engagements. The aim of the project was for students to work together to imagine change by analysing a work of literature that proposes a present or future society of collective human thriving. In their group's students were asked to investigate concepts of freedom, agency, power, oppression, and community using the piece of literature they had decided to work on. They were asked to consider who is centered and who risks marginalized status due to their non-conformity or alternate vision and to consider the way a literary text proposes a better world. To culminate the project students needed to produce a PowerPoint presentation in their groups to present their text in terms of the cultural norms and values it reflects and the vision of change it proposes. Each project was also required to critique South African and USA perceptions relevant to the vision of a sustainable future and to the social contract proposed by the text they had chosen.

The project kicked off with a public lecture hosted on the Zoom platform presented by the university in the USA. All students were invited to attend this. The lecture was on Afrofuturism, which was a central theme that ran throughout the COIL project. Shortly after this, the students were sent the Google form questionnaire to complete. The first synchronous session, where the students met each other and could interact with one another for the first time happened on the Microsoft Teams platform. This was an informal welcome session, where students from each institution shared some information about their country and their institution. This session also served to introduce the COIL project and its structure. All students and staff were then invited to introduce themselves in the form of an icebreaker. This welcome session ran for approximately 45 minutes and ran twice and was co-facilitated by me and the lecturers from the USA. The first 45-minute session was with the ENG 333 class and the second 45-minute session was with the BLK 20 class. Although clear instructions and separate links were sent to my CSTN101 students regarding which session they should attend, based on how they were grouped, I witnessed that my students were confused and therefore a few of them attended the wrong session with many of them attending both sessions. This confusion could be because I was interacting fully online with my students (we had not yet resumed face-to-face teaching and learning) and therefore some students did not check their emails in-time and would rely on secondary information from their peers, which would not always be accurate. Aside from this confusion, the sessions were a success and I noticed that the students started becoming excited about the COIL project.

After the COIL welcome session each student group was sent a Padlet link. These links were shared by all lecturers for their respective students. A total of eight Padlet links were created by a colleague from the USA, four for the ENG 333 and CSTN101 partnership and another four for the BLK 20 and CSTN101 partnership. Each Padlet was created for the four different texts prescribed for the COIL project. Information about the COIL project as well as related resources were uploaded on each of the Padlet links by a colleague from the USA. Students and staff were requested to upload introductions of themselves on the respective Padlet links, and they were also encouraged to interact with one another by commenting on the various introductions. These introductions could be in the form of videos and/or photos and/or written text. I uploaded my personal introduction on each of the eight links.

After the Padlet introductions students were given three weeks to work in their groups on their projects. At the end of the three weeks each group met with at least one of the three lecturers to give an initial presentation and receive feedback. Students were then given another week and a half to incorporate this feedback into their final presentation. Students presented their projects to their lecturers (both me and colleagues from the USA) and to the rest of the class in a synchronous engagement on Microsoft Teams. Similar to the welcome session, these presentations were split into two with the BLK 20 class opting to present first and the ENG 333 class presenting second. Each session was about one hour long. Subsequently, the final presentations were uploaded on the various Padlet links for archiving. They were also uploaded to the respective institutions' learning management systems for grading. Students were also required to upload a reflection on their experiences of the COIL project with this final presentation submission. Each of the three lecturers independently graded their own students' submissions. The COIL project culminated in a final goodbye synchronous session hosted on Zoom. During this session the lecturers briefly presented on what the project had been about. Select student groups also presented their final projects. Thereafter the floor was open to all students to give a verbal reflection on their experiences and to say their final goodbyes to their partners. The final goodbye session invited was shared with all interested students and staff in both institutions, including those outside of the three departments that had partnered on this COIL project.

So, what?

The following section details my positionality, as it relates to how it influenced how I approached conceptualising and running my first COIL project. This section also details the challenges that I faced in running this COIL project.

I define myself as an early career academic because of my limited experience in higher education. I have worked as an academic member of staff at two universities in South Africa for a total of seven years. The first four years I worked in a support department, as one of two academic members of staff, and the latter three years I have been working in a servicing department. In both positions I have not been fully exposed to different aspects of being an academic due to having limited contact with students that are directly affiliated with the department that I work in. This is because in both departments that I have worked in do not offer academic programmes, but rather service the broader institution through providing short courses and undergraduate modules. As such, my experience as an academic has been somewhat limited, as I have not had the privilege of working in a fully-fledged academic department that has its own programmes. Although in literature (Lesenyeno *et al*., 2018) an early career academic is defined as someone who is in their first five years of their academic career, I still contend that I am an early career academic due to my limited experience in a fully-fledged academic department.

This was my first time I was running a COIL project. Additionally, this was the first time that a COIL project ran in my Centre. As such, this meant that I had very limited understanding of what it takes to run a COIL project. Prior to running this COIL project I had attended a few online engagements about what COIL is, and how other academics in my institution had run COIL projects in their modules and departments. These sessions were offered as webinars via the office of International Education and Partnerships in my institution. Outside of these webinars I had very limited knowledge and no experience in COIL. I therefore relied heavily on the support of the COIL coordinator from the office of International Education and Partnerships in running my first COIL project. Based on my past and current experience in academia and my limited experience in COIL, I could say that I entered the partnership with a bit of imposter syndrome. I was not sure about what would unfold, and therefore I lacked confidence in myself and in my ideas. I was unsure whether I had anything meaningful to contribute. Added to this, I was a little bit intimated to work with two professors from the USA and I aware that one of the USA partners had vast experience in doing COIL. I had read quite a few articles on Western hegemony and therefore thought to be quite aware of what this looked like. I also thought I had cemented my identity as an African scholar and could voice my opinions on aspects of including voices from the global South in my curriculum. I was therefore surprised by my willingness to go-along with conceptualising a project that solely drew on literature from the USA as a basis of discussion. As the project unfolded, I became more aware of my discomfort about this, especially because I realised that I could not fully articulate the texts to my students as I was not fully versed in them myself. I also felt guilty that I had not insisted on including South African texts.

I faced a few challenges in running the COIL project. Due to my unfamiliarity with the prescribed USA text I lacked the confidence and knowledge to guide my students meaningfully. I found myself relying on the expertise of my senior colleagues in directing the course of the project. There were some attempts to draw parallels with African literature. Firstly, this was me through suggesting an African text that I thought to speak to the theme of the COIL

project. Students were meant to engage with this text prior to the welcome session and then discuss this text at the welcome session. This did not go ahead as planned, and the text was not read. I am not sure why this was the case, however looking back I think it was because I did not push enough for it. Secondly, as the students started working on their projects, the South African students started looking for and including African texts to draw parallels. These texts were included in their final presentations. This was something quite valuable, and the students from the USA reflected on how this helped them broaden their knowledge.

Another challenge that I faced was that only half of my class was participating, and with the half that was participating I had to split them further. This was frustrating for me as it was time consuming. It felt like I was running three classes in one. It became laborious ensuring that all students in my class knew exactly what was going on and when, and it sometimes became confusing for the students. It was also difficult ensuring that the students who were not participating in COIL did not feel left out of the conversation. As such, all students were invited to the synchronous engagements. Another challenge that I faced was the time difference. At the beginning of the project South Africa was seven hours ahead of the USA, and by the end of the project this had reduced to six hours. The time difference was ideal for the synchronous engagements, as the part-time class met in the evening and coincidently at the same time as the students in the USA. It became a challenge during meetings between myself and the colleagues from the USA, as these would be late at night for me. This meant that during the time of the COIL project I had longer days, sometimes with meetings running until 21:00, which was not ideal. During the first few weeks of the project the KwaZulu-Natal province experienced flooding. Many of my students were affected by this, and in-turn this affected their engagement in their groups towards the final presentation. This was a tough time for the students, as many of them felt disconnected. The students managed to get access to devices, and in their groups, devised a plan moving forward. This plan included each affected student working independently on an identified aspect of the presentation. This was not ideal as the aim was for students to work collaboratively as opposed to individually producing work and then putting it together in the end. However, due to the difficulties in connectivity the latter was adopted. The South African students affected by the flooding reported feeling very supported by their group members and this was quite encouraging. I also felt quite supported, with my colleagues calling to check how I was doing. While the flooding presented some challenges that had not been anticipated, the way that everybody affected was able to quickly pivot served as a good example of how to manage crisis in international collaboration.

Now what?

This section draws on what I have learnt and what I aim to do differently as I engage in COIL moving forward. One of my biggest lessons was the importance of having a voice and exercising agency. I believe that had I done this, the project may have been conceptualised a bit differently. I also noted that my students picked up on my lack of confidence, and as such at the beginning of the project I noticed them taking a step back and allowing the students from the USA to lead. I realised that it is important for me to model assertiveness to my students, so that they could also learn to assert themselves.

It is quite evident that there were some power dynamics at play, which should be reflected on against the backdrop of what has, in the past, typically characterised relationships between the global North and global South (Heleta and Chasi, 2023; Mthiyane and Jarvis, 2024). In my experience, to some extent, this collaborative effort reflected broader issues of academic colonialism and epistemic injustice, where historical legacies of colonialism continue to shape the dynamics of knowledge production and exchange (Boughey and McKenna, 2021). This is important to reflect on, particularly as it relates to how COIL is conceptualised at my UoT. It also warrants further investigation into how this conceptualisation could translate meaningfully into how academics collaborate on the global landscape. Reflecting more critically on my experience, I can see how my imposter syndrome intersects with systemic inequalities in academic global North – global South collaborations. In a forthcoming publication I delve deeper into this reflection on my experience with a colleague who shared a similar experience when they engaged in their first COIL project with a colleague from the global North. I further explore the implications of such engagements in relation to epistemic plurality (Heleta and Chasi, 2023) and propose a conceptual framework to frame ethical engagement in global North – global South collaborations.

Another lesson was the importance of continuous professional development. When it comes to COIL this means attending as many training opportunities as possible and having a mentor. Mentoring is an important part of an early career's academic of professional development and their induction into academia (Tynan and Garbett, 2007). As such, since this COIL project, I have attended morning training sessions that are also offered outside of my

institution. These training sessions have enabled me to grow my knowledge and thus my confidence. This means that moving forward I can approach a new COIL partnership with a level of assertiveness. Realising the importance of mentorship, I have started to mentor colleagues in my department to run COIL projects. I have run my second COIL project alongside a colleague, and I am currently supporting another colleague in conceptualising their COIL project. This mentorship is to ensure that there is sufficient support in the department for such engagements and is therefore a strategic priority associated with colleagues' career goals (Debowski, 2013). By including African literature in their final presentations, my students me inspired to explore the use of COIL as a pedagogical tool to enhance African scholarship. This means foregrounding the African experience and African texts in my COIL engagements. This also means partnering with an African higher education institution. As such, post the 2022 COIL engagement in addition to my already established partnership with the university from the USA, I partnered with a university in Kenya on a new COIL project for 2023. This partnership also ensured that I could include all my students in COIL projects and no student would be left behind.

Finally, as this was my first COIL experience, I saw the value in documenting it through personal reflection. I also realised that this was a first experience for my students as well. As such, I invited interested students to do this with me and I had one student present their experience alongside me at an academic conference. This student found it so valuable to be able to speak on this platform at such an early stage in their academic career (they were in their first year of undergraduate study). As such, I will continue to encourage students to present on their experiences of subsequent COIL experiences with me moving forward.

Conclusion

Whereas this paper provides a unique reflective perspective on an early career academic's experience, a limitation of this paper is that the experience of the students involved in the COIL project were not considered. As such, after having run this COIL project I applied for ethical approval to research the experiences of my students in another COIL project that I ran a year later. These experiences will be documented in a forthcoming publication. This paper provides a unique reflective experience of running a COIL project as an early career academic. Key learnings include having sufficient capacity building opportunities, including mentorship, to ensure that one is confident in their abilities and can thus exercise their agency and have a voice. This also speaks to the key role that COIL practitioners have in building the capacity of academics to successfully run COIL projects, and the support they can provide academics as they do this. Another key learning is the importance of privileging African scholarship and centring the African experience in curriculum especially as it pertains to internationalisation. This is of particular importance in-line with the ongoing conversations of decolonising and Africanising higher education. Rolfe *et al*. (2001) have provided a useful framework for me to critically reflect on my practice, and it is hoped that my experiences, reflections, and learning will be of benefit to other early career academics who engage in COIL projects.

Declarations

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