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Crossing Digital Frontiers: Hybridization and Transversal Learning in COIL-Driven Arts-Based Inquiry

Cruzando fronteras digitales: hibridación y aprendizaje transversal en la investigación basada en las artes impulsada por COIL

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Abstract

This article explores the transformative potential of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) as a borderless space for hybrid artistic and pedagogical practices, drawing on an arts-based research (ABR) study involving undergraduate art students from Helwan University, Egypt, and collaborators from a Canadian institution. Reframed through concepts of third space theory, border thinking, rhizomatic learning, post-digital hybridity, and transversal pedagogy, the study examines how digital tools—such as Zoom, WhatsApp, and multimedia exchanges—facilitate knowledge exchange, interrelation, and hybridization across geographic, disciplinary, and social boundaries. By positioning creative writing as a generative inquiry (Leavy, 2017), we co-created narratives that disrupt normative discourses in art education, fostering emergent, collective thinking and social intervention. The findings illustrate COIL's role in community engagement, where digital hybridity enables transcultural artistic transformations and empowers future educators to address global challenges like cultural equity and environmental advocacy. This contributes to the "Without Borders" theme by highlighting digital technologies as catalysts for educational and social change, offering methodological insights for post-digital art pedagogies. Implications extend to broader fields, advocating for inclusive, hybrid models that transcend traditional borders in higher education.

Keywords: Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL); Digital hybridity; transversal pedagogy; Border thinking; Reimagining art practice; Rhizomatic learning.

Resumen

Este artículo explora el potencial transformador del Aprendizaje Colaborativo Internacional en Línea (COIL) como un espacio sin fronteras para prácticas artísticas y pedagógicas híbridas, basándose en un estudio de investigación basada en las artes (ABR) con estudiantes de pregrado de arte de la Universidad de Helwan, Egipto, y colaboradores de una institución canadiense. Reenmarcado a través de conceptos de la teoría del tercer espacio, el pensamiento fronterizo, el aprendizaje rizomático, la hibridez posdigital y la pedagogía transversal, el estudio examina cómo las herramientas digitales —como Zoom, WhatsApp y los intercambios multimedia— facilitan el intercambio de conocimientos, la interrelación y la hibridación a través de fronteras geográficas, disciplinarias y sociales. Al posicionar la escritura creativa como una indagación generativa (Leavy, 2017), co-creamos narrativas que alteran los discursos normativos en la educación artística, fomentando el pensamiento colectivo emergente y la intervención social. Los hallazgos ilustran el papel de COIL en el compromiso comunitario, donde la hibridez digital permite transformaciones artísticas transculturales y empodera a los futuros educadores para abordar desafíos globales como la equidad cultural y la defensa ambiental. Esto contribuye al tema "Sin Fronteras" al resaltar las tecnologías digitales como catalizadores para el cambio educativo y social, ofreciendo perspectivas metodológicas para las pedagogías del arte posdigitales.

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Palabras clave: Aprendizaje Colaborativo Internacional en Línea (COIL); hibridez digital; pedagogía transversal; pensamiento fronterizo; reimaginando la práctica artística; aprendizaje rizomático.

To begin-with

In the fluid weave of digital threads that traverse continents, Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) emerges as a nomadic pedagogical space that facilitates dynamic movements between artistic practice and educational inquiry (Rubin, 2018). Drawing on an arts-based research (ABR) project between undergraduate art students at Helwan University in Egypt and their Canadian collaborators, this paper moves through liminal zones where experiential dialogue and experiential writing blur established boundaries and generate unexpected hybridizations. It is an assemblage of voices—a weaving of digital and material realities shaped through platforms such as Zoom and WhatsApp. Resonating with third space theory (Bhabha, 1994), these encounters are reframed as generative borderlands in which rhizomatic learning (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) and transversal pedagogy (Giroux, 1992) intersect with conditions of post-digital hybridity (Cramer, 2015). Within this context, creative writing operates not merely as a reflective tool but as a mode of living inquiry (Leavy, 2017), co-producing narratives that challenge normative exchanges in art education. As we proceed, each fragment of writing operates as a trace of our collective becoming, capturing the unexpected connections—from object itineraries to transcultural resonances—that inform our pursuit of a borderless art pedagogy attuned to global imperatives of equity and environmental relationality.

Draft One: The pen begins

In this essay, we investigate the potential of a creative writing process with four undergraduate students from Helwan University, Egypt, as they engaged in a collaborative online international learning (COIL) initiative. By reimagining their art practices through a creative writing inquiry, we sought to understand how COIL shaped their perspectives as future art educators. Our research curiosity explored the perceptions of the COIL experience, its affect on normative processes, and the nature of our learning process: 1) How has this experience been perceived and actualized from various points of view? 2) How does COIL expose, disrupt, displace, or dispose of normative discourses as future art teachers? 3) Discuss our learning experience in terms of responsiveness, emergent, collective, and attuned thinking-making-doing processes; what were some of the unanticipated connections and relations that emerged in this project? How did those unanticipated moments help us grow differently?

Drawing on Leavy's (2017) concept of generative inquiry and Skains' (2018) framework of practice-led research, we approached writing as a generative process where the act of writing itself drove our inquiry. Our conversations, drafts, and feedback

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constituted a new research space, where the act of writing itself became a catalyst for exploration. Our writing became a unique collaboration, both responding to and shaping the process of our correspondence, which was not just a reflection or presentation of art practice, but as a creative space, allowing us to explore its potential in innovative ways linked to our previous experience of COIL.

As their mentor, I was present throughout the students' writing journey and worked to transform their experiences and emotions into English expressions. Through ongoing discussions, I familiarized them with the essential elements of English writing, including criteria and structure. I further supported them by editing their stories, solidifying this experience as an inseparable collaboration where our contributions were interwoven. As their mentor, I transcended the traditional role, becoming an integral part of their writing process, blending my body and mind with theirs to enhance their correspondence and creativity. We attempt to reimagine our experiences and encounters not only through a reflective writing process but also as a provocative and speculative practice of writing to explore the potential of arts-based approaches in fostering generative thinking, even in reimaging of our art practices. Inspired by our Zoom meetings, ongoing WhatsApp conversations, and feedback on students' step-by-step drafts, different sections of our essay have been categorized under draft titles to illustrate our inquiry from idea to this final essay.

This ABR methodology aligns with third space theory (Bhabha, 1994), positioning our collaborative writing as a hybrid borderland where local and global knowledges intermingle, fostering interrelations that challenge epistemic hierarchies. By integrating post-digital hybridity (Cramer, 2015), we frame digital tools as mediators of transversal pedagogy (Giroux, 1992), enabling non-linear, rhizomatic learning (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) that expands boundaries in art education.

Draft Two: Re-imaging art practices through words

To contextualize the multiplicity of students' experiences, it is crucial to acknowledge their participation in a Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) (Banerjee et al., 2023; Fulco & Goldsmith, 2023; Naicker et al., 2022) art practice initiative undertaken last year in collaboration with graduate students from a Canadian institution. This COIL project focused on the theme of object itineraries, and we were immersed in two distinct, yet intricately interwoven, experiential learning engagements. The first phase entailed a self-directed exploration of cultural and artistic materials, assembling the collections of local museums around the Canadian institution and Helwan University, where students were engaged in an exchange of their local art-crafts and creation of art responses as the result of this exchange. These conversations have been facilitated by the establishment of WhatsApp groups, fostering a collaborative learning environment where students were able to communicate synchronously and asynchronously, bridging time zone differences and language barriers.

WhatsApp's multimedia capabilities allowed for the exchange of photos of their

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local crafts, sketches of their evolving art pieces, and even short videos and audios showcasing their creative process. This constant exchange of ideas and visual inspiration within the WhatsApp group became an integral part of students' artistic journey, fostering a sense of community and shared purpose despite the geographical separation. These encounters and experiences are translated into various text formats through discussions, meeting sessions, and reflections shared within the WhatsApp group. Students documented their creative process, exchanged ideas about their artwork, and provided feedback on each other's work, all through text-media-based communication on the platform.

The second phase of the project unfolded within the virtual realm, transcending geographical constraints to converge at the Time-Based Media Exhibition hosted by MAMBO (Modern Art Museum of Bogota). Leveraging digital platforms, students engaged in a collaborative exploration of time-based media art, resulting in a series of podcasts that served as a demonstration of the transformative potential of virtual collaboration. This exploration culminated in the creation of a series of podcasts, where their artistic experiences were translated into a new format – spoken word and audio editing. This progression from visual and textual communication in the WhatsApp group to the creation of audio pieces in the second phase reflects the ongoing transformation of experiences into various forms of expression throughout the project.

In a similar vein, our own formation as a group writing about our experiences over these past six months exemplifies this ongoing translation process. We are now collaboratively documenting our artistic journeys through written text, mirroring the way our initial encounters with objects and virtual exhibitions were rephrased into various forms of communication within the WhatsApp group and ultimately these podcasts. This project operates as a fertile space for the potential of COIL initiatives in fostering creative exchange and artistic exploration across geographic and cultural boundaries. Reframed through border thinking (Mignolo, 2000), this phase illustrates how digital hybridity blurs Global South-North divides, creating third spaces for knowledge co-creation (Rubin, 2018). The multimedia exchanges embody rhizomatic learning, where unanticipated connections emerge, aligning with the journal's emphasis on hybridization and interaction for social transformation.

With the project's digital framework now established, under the mentor's presence, let us drift into the personal narratives where individual voices emerge as distinct inflections within a shared creative field, revealing how collective interactions extended and reshaped their respective artistic horizons.

Draft Three: Stepping into a world of unexpected friendships (Author 4)

The pixelated image on my phone screen sparked a chain reaction. It wasn't just a poster advertising a COIL program; it was a portal to a world of unexpected friendships, artistic exploration, and a newfound confidence in my own voice. Stepping out of my comfort zone, I enrolled in the English-language art education class, keen to delve into this unknown territory. Little did I know, the journey would not only reshape my understanding of art

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education but also transform the way I saw myself as a learner and future educator.
Joining the WhatsApp group felt like stepping into a lively exchange of ideas. Messages buzzed with greetings in different languages, underlined by photos of museum exhibits and sketches of evolving artwork. I was initially hesitant to contribute - my English wasn't perfect, and the thought of expressing myself in writing felt daunting. However, the warmth and encouragement of my peers were contagious. Soon, I found myself exchanging messages, sharing my thoughts on the intricate weavings in the Cairo Museum of Fine Arts and the captivating stories woven into them (Binder, 2022). It was as if the limitations of physical distance disappeared, replaced by a vibrant online community, mirroring the "behind the scenes" space Venter (2020, p.7) describes.

Mentor Author 1's guidance encouraged us to document our experiences. Initially, the task of translating our artistic encounters into written narratives felt overwhelming. We weren't just describing objects; we were capturing the emotions they evoked, the connections we made, and the way they challenged our perspectives. But as we delved deeper, words became a new means of exploration. Describing the textures of ancient artifacts or the soundscapes of our virtual exhibition helped us relive those moments, deepening our understanding of them, and aligning with research suggesting the benefits of purposeful engagement in collaborative learning (Suarez et al., 2020).

This process wasn't always smooth. There were moments of frustration when the right word seemed elusive, and the nuances of our experiences felt lost in translation. But through ongoing discussions and feedback, we learned to refine our language, becoming more comfortable with expressing ourselves through writing. It was a slow dance between capturing our artistic exploration and crafting a compelling narrative, similar to the transformation Binder (2022) describes when discussing COIL as a space for "meaning-making, storied lived experiences, and community" (p. 60).

As I reflect on this transformative journey, the impact of COIL extends far beyond the pages of this essay. It generates a deep appreciation for the power of collaborative learning and the importance of fostering transnational understanding. This experience sparked a passion for integrating technology and storytelling into my future teaching practice. Imagine a classroom where the walls dissolve, replaced by boundless virtual connections. This echoes the "dynamic virtual space of learning" Palulis (2022, p.132) describes, where students can explore museums across the globe and collaborate with peers from diverse backgrounds, nurturing the "gift of friendship" that Binder (2022, p.60) emphasizes. This is the vision COIL has instilled in me. By weaving together technology, artistic expression, and storytelling, I hope to create a learning environment that empowers students not only to appreciate art, but also to discover their voice and share their unique perspectives with the world, fulfilling the goals of COIL initiatives as outlined by Banerjee et al. (2023) and Fulco & Goldsmith (2023). This narrative exemplifies transversal pedagogy, crossing pedagogical borders to foster emergent interrelations, while post-digital hybridity in WhatsApp exchanges creates rhizomatic pathways for personal growth and community engagement (Giroux, 1992; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). As one collaborator's reflections recede into the resonances of prior engagements—sustained in part by the mentor's supportive presence—another emerges,

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articulating cultural perspectives that extend the inquiry into a hybrid assemblage in which artistic practice operates as a tacit dialogue across spatial and conceptual borders.

Draft Four: Threads of culture woven through art (Author 5)

COIL has been an eye-opening experience for me, knitting together threads of different cultures and artistic expressions, transcending geographical boundaries, and enriching my understanding of art and its various contexts to understand the "why, how, and why" of the process of making-meaning-doing (Beelen & Doscher, 2023). This resonated deeply with the struggle of navigating the vast amount of information available today. While resources are plentiful, the pursuit of truly diverse knowledge can feel inaccessible amidst the daily confusion. As an artist and educator, I desired a broader understanding that encompassed Art History and Criticism alongside pedagogical methodologies and emerging artistic experiences. COIL emerged as a fertile space, offering a unique space for ongoing exploration and intellectual growth that transcended traditional methods, I was familiar with.

One such exploration involved delving into the creative process of my Canadian peers, fostering a deeper appreciation for the social, historical, and cultural contexts that shape artistic expression, which encompass a vibrant tapestry woven from countless threads. Shary Boyle's evocative sculpture "Sea Change" (Boyle, 2014) operates as a particularly powerful visual illustration, unraveling the complicated relationship between Indigenous cultures and the Canadian ecological environment (Boyle, 2014). The way the artwork highlighted the impact of external forces resonated deeply with Egypt's own rich heritage, prompting me to embark on virtual museum walks and share the resulting images and information within our WhatsApp group. This exchange became a bridge, transcending the conventional narrative of Egypt's ancient past, and illuminating the complex cultural artifacts that continue to thrive today. As we exchanged artistic experiences, the lines between "us" and "them" blurred (Rubin, 2023, p.73). The traditional notions of ownership and cultural belonging dissolved, replaced by a spirit of collective exploration. Art became the common language, fostering a vibrant cultural dialogue that exceeded the constraints of nationality, ethnicity, and geography.

This wasn't just about artistic expression; COIL's impact extended far beyond and instilled valuable experiences in collaboration and affective communication. Navigating diverse viewpoints and equitably distributing tasks within the group provided insights into teamwork and leadership. These studies, I realized, extended the confines of academic experiences and were applicable to real-world scenarios where adaptability and cooperation are paramount. Moreover, the exchange acted as a potent reminder of art's capability to move beyond mere aesthetics in being a powerful means for societal contemplation and environmental advocacy. Shary Boyle's "Sea Change" embodied this perfectly, shedding light on pressing environmental concerns. It inspired me to delve into such impactful narrative in my own work and to appreciate the transformative power of art to foster positive change within my community. This sensation mirrored the insights

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shared by Deardorff (2023), who emphasizes the importance of knowledge mobility in COIL initiatives, an advocate for "not only communication across national borders but also communication within human diversity that is inclusive of age, race, genders, religions, socioeconomic backgrounds, physical abilities, ideological beliefs, and so on" (p.275).

The COIL program has greatly reshaped my perspectives on art, education, and collaboration. It has facilitated a deeper comprehension of cultural contexts, artistic methodologies, and the interconnections of global challenges. This experience has offered a practical platform for exploration, urging me to dismantle barriers and embrace the diversity of teaching and learning. I now, comprehend that the language of art has the remarkable potential to transcend geographical boundaries. As I progress in my artistic and educational endeavors, I carry with me the insights gained from COIL as demonstration of art affects in virtual exchange, fostering comprehension, cooperation, and constructive change across borders. Through border thinking, this thread-weaving disrupts colonial narratives, creating hybrid assemblages that promote social intervention and educational equity (Mignolo, 2000; Cramer, 2015). From these interconnected encounters, we proceed toward the digital infrastructures that mediate transnational exchange, spaces in which informal WhatsApp communications coalesce into shared aesthetic and pedagogical formations, guiding the reader into subsequent layers of this unfolding inquiry.

Draft Five: WhatsApp as a bridge between languages (Author 6)

The initial Zoom meetings initially felt awkward due to the time difference between Egypt and Canada. While our team in Egypt endured late nights, our Canadian counterparts were just starting their day. However, despite these initial challenges, a sense of community grew within our WhatsApp group. We exchanged images of the detailed metalwork from the Mohamed Ali Museum, encouraging discussions that transcended language barriers. Through the use of emojis, we expressed laughter and enthusiasm, juxtaposing these common visual expressions with the contemporary installations at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. Additionally, we shared evolving artwork sketches, each stroke capturing a distinct interpretation of the "object itineraries" theme. Our communication extended beyond visuals, as we used brief videos to capture the sound of hammers shaping metal and the rhythmic brushstrokes on canvas, providing insights into our creative processes. The asynchronous nature of WhatsApp (Venter, 2020) facilitated deliberate responses, even if they were delayed by a few hours. We offered comprehensive feedback encompassing both technical and emotional aspects of each other's work. A single "wow" emoji represented deep opinion, while detailed suggestions contributed to the refinement of our artistic vision. This ongoing exchange transcended mere artistic collaboration; it was an organ in forging meaningful connections. It felt akin to a collaborative effort to create a resilient, continually evolving mural, with each contribution adding a distinctive layer.

In line with the progression of our exploration of art forms from physical objects

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to virtual exhibitions, our approach to documenting experiences has similarly evolved. The preliminary discussions and reflections within the WhatsApp group provided the foundational material for this collaborative written work. This process involved the translation of our online shared emotions and experiences into the framework of a formal essay. Author 1 took on the role of guiding us, affectively acting as a bridge to facilitate our expression in English. It encompassed not only grammatical considerations but also encapsulated the significance of this project to each of us. The essay depicts the culmination of extensive late-night discussions on WhatsApp, the collective enthusiasm for artistic exploration, and the affective role of COIL in nurturing creative exchange (Banerjee et al., 2023). It operates as an affirmation of the notion that, despite geographical barriers, collaborative efforts can lead to truly meaningful outcomes. The participatory nature of this learning experience, where we actively contributed our thoughts and efforts to create something meaningful, underscored the value of "giving value" rather than merely "receiving value." This sense of purpose and importance made the learning process deeply rewarding and worthwhile. This bridge-building embodies post-digital hybridity, where multimedia tools create third spaces for transversal interactions, fostering rhizomatic growth in linguistic and cultural hybridizations (Cramer, 2015; Bhabha, 1994). Crossing these linguistic and communicative bridges, we then move into the broadening of discourses, where initially localised understandings expand into global frames of reference. This transition carries the reader along rhizomatic trajectories marked by exprientation, contingency, and creative disruption.

Draft Six: From limited discourse to global perspectives (Author 7)

As we engaged with each other in the WhatsApp group, the range of voices and knowledge in the educational discourse broadened, and the challenges increased, yet my normative discourse of art education expanded on a global scale. As an undergraduate student, this was a new experience, but in recent years, universities have increasingly become more proactive in broadening the scope of their international activities to prepare students for what O'Dowd (2017) describes as an intrinsically digitalized, globalized, and multicultural world. Initially, my experiences in art practices were constrained to a specific methodology and methods. However, through the COIL project, particularly the art response and podcast collaboration, I discovered multilayered approaches to contemporary art education on a global context.

My exposure to a wider range of art perspectives has challenged my limitations, prompting a deeper understanding of diversity, inclusion, and exploration. Through the COIL project, I not only learned from my peers but also from the professors, discovering various methods and methodologies in contemporary art education. Collaborative online learning supports the co-creation of knowledge, and the development of skills related to interactions, such as critical thinking, leadership, problem-solving, and intercultural communication (Vahed & Rodríguez, 2021). This integration of multiple perspectives, experiences, and artistic traditions led to an inclusive and thorough educational experience.

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COIL overturned my typical way of working with peers, which, in my experience often tended to face challenges or have a limited impact on my perspectives. It offered a different form of agency and empowerment through which we were able to express our ideas without hesitation or compromise. We embraced our differences, overcoming any boundaries to reach a middle ground of understanding one another. During my first project, making a visual art response to my teammate's walks in The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, I realized that learning about other cultures and artistic traditions can be accessible and engaging through fruitful conversations. Our conversations, according to Farley and Hillyard (2023), became a familiar research method to collect, interpret, and analyze received data. It was also understood to be a methodology "in which the sharing of knowledge and the growth of understanding occurs through meaning-making processes" (Feldman, 1999, p.197). This way of collaborating gave us a different form of agency in our learning, making me recognize the value of expressing my voice and opinion in discussions without any filtering.

Through these collaborative experiences, I've realized that as a student, I have the ability to make decisions, set goals, and actively participate in shaping my educational experiences innovatively. This experience has empowered me to believe in the positive impact I can make as a future educator, gaining a deeper appreciation and understanding of the importance of art education from a global perspective. Reframed via border thinking, this expansion disrupts normative constraints, promoting transversal pedagogy that hybridizes global discourses for social and educational transformation (Mignolo, 2000; Giroux, 1992).

Last Draft: An assemblage of words and experience

This investigation of the COIL art practice has been a dynamic interplay between past experiences and present re-imaginings, and re-viewings of encounters and experiences through an extended collaboration. The initial spark came from our year-long collaborative project, centred around the theme of Object Itineraries within a COIL framework. The project, as detailed in the "drafts," acted as a fertile space for examining our experiences through a critical lens. Each "draft" denotes a stage in our inquiry, moving from initial questions about COIL's impact to the final piece you hold in your hands. Throughout this journey, words played a central role. They were not just tools for communication, but dynamic forces shaped by and shaping our collaboration. We explored the potential of creative writing collaboratively to capture the essence of artistic expression, a process that exceeded mere reflection and entered the realm of creative exploration. Looking back, this project stands as an illustration of the transformative power of COIL initiatives, fostering exchange, challenging perspectives, and pushing us to reimagine the boundaries of art education. From the initial spark of the COIL project to the final written word, this journey has been a tapestry of experiences woven together through communication and creativity.

As an assemblage, this final reflection synthesizes rhizomatic learning across

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drafts, highlighting digital hybridity's role in community engagement and the "Without Borders" theme. It contributes methodologically to ABR by demonstrating how transversal pedagogies enable hybrid knowledge production, with implications for decolonial art education and scalable digital interventions (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; O'Dowd, 2022). Within this multiplicity of drafts and drifts, where digital boundaries dissolve into collaborative imaginaries, we move back to the generative potential of COIL: a pedagogical space without specified borders that hybridizes perspectives, unsettles normative assumptions, and cultivates transversal formations of learning and practice (Giroux, 1992). The narratives arising from everyday digital interactions, from WhatsApp "whispers" to Zoom-mediated encounters, disclose not only individual shifts but also collective rhizomes oriented toward equity and advocacy (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Released into the dialogic space of this research, these accounts invite continued engagement, urging art educators to recognize post-digital hybridity as a catalyst for border-transgressive pedagogies in which unexpected connections persistently emerge, reconfiguring both practice and relationality (Cramer, 2015).

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