

Conference Report [*Female Voices in the Third Space: Researching Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in South-North Collaborative Online International Learning \(COIL\)*](#)



Picture 1: The *Female Voices in the Third Space* project team: from left to right, Jenny Wells, Kyria Finardi, Marina Orsini-Jones, Lynette Jacobs and Katherine Wimpenny (at the front)

On Monday 18th March the first dissemination international conference of the British Academy/Leverhulme funded project [*Female Voices in the Third Space: Researching Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in South-North Collaborative Online International Learning \(COIL\)*](#) was held at the Coventry Conferences Centre (Simulation building) and delivered in hybrid mode. Seventy attendees from all over the world (from Brazil, South Africa, China, Vietnam, The Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, Spain, Switzerland, India, Cyprus, Nigeria, Türkiye, Pakistan, Poland, Taiwan and the UK) attended in person or online. Experts on COIL from a variety of different subjects that included students, academics, COIL consultants and academic developers joined the conference. Many attendees came to Coventry to also take part in workshops on Tuesday 19th and Wednesday 20th for the successful Erasmus+ funded COIL project: [iKUDU](#).

The conference started with a welcome to Coventry and Coventry University by the organiser, Professor Marina Orsini-Jones, based in the Research Centre for Global Learning (GLEA), followed by an update on the progress of the *Female Voices in the Third Space* project by the project team (Professor Finardi, from Universidade Federal do Espírito Santo, Brazil, Professor Jacobs from the University of the Free State in South Africa, Professor Wimpenny and Professor Orsini-Jones from Coventry University). They illustrated the study that aims to research the evolving field of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) in Higher Education (HE) through a Global South-North research project, focusing on female voices. COIL is defined as a collaborative online teaching and learning approach with international partners that fosters intercultural dialogue. The talk discussed a model of South-North COIL previously co-designed by the applicants (Wimpenny, Finardi, Orsini-Jones & Jacobs, 2022) against data generated through interviews with female stakeholders based in HE institutions in four different continents. The research aims to further the understanding of digital inclusion and equality in HE. It investigates COIL as a Third Space that promotes substantive equality and supports the integration of global citizenship attributes in HE curricula. In particular it seeks to decenter the conceptualisation of 'Internationalisation of the

Curriculum (IoC)' and open up 'otherwise' ways of knowing, being and relating through a decolonial lens that builds on knowledge produced by women.

The first talk by the project team was followed by former Coventry University students' reflections on their COIL experience in terms of an equal, diverse and inclusive learning space for women. Preeti Suri (from India), Patience Mkpayah (from Nigeria), Sofia di Sarno García (dual nationality, Italy and Spain) and Guray Koseaglu (from Northern Cyprus) were all students with an applied linguistics background who had participated in COIL projects attached to the Masters in English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics at Coventry University. They all provided thoughtful insights on the powerful impact that COIL had on their academic learning experience and on their current professional and/or academic practice. Preeti Suri stated that engaging with COIL had made her feel valued and her voice heard in this Third Space that bridges geographical and cultural boundaries, expands knowledge from diverse perspectives and fosters digital literacy, communication, and team work. COIL she added, can however prove to be challenging for some students and measures can be taken to help with this, such as 'taster' sessions before the project starts and ice-breakers. Guray Koseaglu stressed the inclusivity, equality, accessibility and mutuality of the COIL space, also adding it can bring enthusiasm for learning. She stated she had valued her experience as e-mediator in breakout rooms as it had taught her valuable negotiation teaching skills. She also said, like Preeti before her, that she had felt her voice was heard and it mattered. Patience Mkpayah mentioned her painful experience of being turned down for an English language teaching job in Nigeria for not speaking the 'King's English', and highlighted the fact that discussing what English should be taught and used via a COIL project with other international students had validated her view that English Language Teaching should be seen through a decolonised perspective and that varieties of English, like the Nigerian one, should be accepted and respected. Sofia di Sarno García, who has now become a lecturer implementing COIL, mentioned some of the challenges that can be encountered when engaging with this Third Space, such as connectivity issues, time difference and the initial discomfort of finding oneself in a learning space that is not familiar and suggested ways of managing both students' expectations and possible discomfort, through pedagogical preparation and mediation before the project starts. Despite the challenges mentioned, these talks validated the argument that COIL can be an empowering and inclusive learning space for female students (and staff) in HE.

After the lunch break, female academics who had used COIL in their practice shared their reflections on their experience. Dr Valeria Baloyi from the University of Venda, South Africa reported on *Cross-cultural perspective on the impact of Covid 19 on students' mental health* and stressed the importance of carrying out interdisciplinary COIL projects integrated into the curriculum and aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), also highlighting the importance of training staff in COIL theory and practice and obtaining institutional 'buy-in'. Ms Nomfundo Khoza, from the Central University of Technology in South Africa reported on her *COIL experience and reflections* on the two COIL projects she took part in and concluded that 'the COIL-VE Third Space offers a compelling model for enriching educational experiences through virtual collaboration and intercultural engagement'. Ms Ané Church from the University of the Free State, South Africa, discussed *Enhancing Skills Development through COIL* and reported on the positive integration of gamification into her COIL projects relating to the topic of 'Auditing and Corporate Governance: Client Acceptance and Risk Assessment'. Students co-constructed subject knowledge in an innovative way through COIL active learning and role-plays. Dr Asuman Aşık from Gazi University, Türkiye, followed on with her talk: *Reflections from female academics with VE/COIL experiences from Türkiye* and summed up the value-added offered by COIL to female participants, that included increased intercultural sensitivity, feeling safe and more confident with their variety of English and

innovative professional development opportunities for English language teachers (both novice and experienced). Professor Andrea Wehrli from Bern University of Applied Sciences, Switzerland concluded this session with her *Learning with and from the Global South – Intercultural reflections on a multilingual Brazilian-Swiss COIL from a Swiss perspective* arguing that South-North COIL helps participants with recognising diversity, learning to become more inclusive and building Global citizenship 'otherwise'.

The 'Female staff voices' session was followed by an interactive knowledge-sharing workshop led by two COIL experts and consultants: Mrs Eva Haug (University of Applied Sciences, The Netherlands) and Professor Ntsoaki Malebo (Central University of Technology, South Africa) who invited participants to: 1. Reflect on their COIL experiences 'highs' and 'low'; 2. Discuss COIL impact for their practice/their students 3. Discuss recommendations for best practice in South-North COIL-VE 4. Write on the Padlet wall and report back. This activity generated a healthy South-North debate on COIL integration into the curriculum and its impact on the learning experience of female staff and students. It also brought to light the positive impact that COIL can have on the development of transversal skills, while also listing the challenges that can be encountered, such as technology issues, teacher workload and lack of institutional support. Extensive co-planning, co-piloting, institutional recognition, robust technical infrastructure and effective mediation for breakout room tasks emerged as some of the recommendations for good COIL practice.

The workshop was followed by concluding remarks and the conference attendees met later at *The Artisan Pub and Grill* in Coventry for the conference evening meal, where they were also joined by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor Curriculum Dr Andrew Turner, who is supportive of COIL integration into the curriculum and who stated that:

COIL is really important in supporting our active applied social and inclusive approach to the curriculum. It allows community building [...] it allows students to collaborate with other students around the world and to explore problems with different perspectives. It allows students to develop their intercultural capabilities, their communicative skills and they fit into our five graduate attributes that we embed throughout our curriculum [...] It broadens horizons.

The feedback on the conference, collected via an anonymous Microsoft form, was very positive, these are answers to the question 'up top 3 things we did well':

The topics were super interesting and the speakers were super informative. Thank you!

It was open minded, open space for all voices, the set-up of programme and depth of programme.

This event was amazing! I truly enjoyed it, your passion, motivation and knowledge. The people who attended it were really lovely too. You were such amazing hosts!

Interactive and inclusive communication, interesting topics from speakers

The space for students/participants feedback/input; the break out rooms with a clear-cut tasks; the conference schedule, well organized, to the point, very productive

The friendly atmosphere; intellectual debates in coil; time keeping; networking

The talks and discussion from the conference will contribute to the British Academy/Leverhulme [*Female Voices in the Third Space: Researching Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in South-North*](#)

[Collaborative Online International Learning \(COIL\)](#) research outputs and the building of a GLEA impact case study on COIL for the next Research Excellence Framework submission in 2029. It is also expected that the conference will generate more COIL collaboration on the theorisation and practice of COIL amongst those who attended and further cross-fertilisation of COIL ideas between the Female Voices project and the iKUDU one. The Female Voices Team would also like to warmly thank the staff in the Research Excellence and Impact Team for providing funding support for the catering for this international conference.

For those who could not attend, the talks will be available at the conference website in next few weeks.



For further information about this project and/or conference please contact Marina Orsini-Jones (m.orsini@coventry.ac.uk)