Enhancing peer-assessment in higher education within a Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) project between Italy and Finland

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Abstract

This article reports the results of a Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) project involving students from the University of Genoa and Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences in Helsinki. It aimed to explore whether and how COIL can enhance peer-assessment skills by examining the relationships between its three core elements: collaboration, online interaction, and internationality. A qualitative research design was

[i] M.P.: conceptualisation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, project administration, writing—original draft. O.V.: conceptualisation. D.P.: conceptualisation. E.N.: conceptualisation, formal analysis. E.M.: writing—review and editing. S.R.: writing—review and editing. C.S.: writing—review and editing. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.1970-2221/21511

chosen, involving 34 participants (24 Italians and 10 Finns) aged 26 to 40, who worked together through synchronous and asynchronous tasks. The findings show that international teamwork is perceived as an effective context for developing soft skills such as multilingualism, critical thinking, and peer collaboration. In particular, the international dimension was perceived as especially valuable in improving peer-assessment skills, as exposure to diverse perspectives enriched feedback processes. Moreover, results underscore the positive perception COIL's role in fostering inclusive learning environments that prepare students to address future professional challenges effectively.

Questo articolo presenta i risultati di un progetto di Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) che ha coinvolto studenti dell'Università di Genova e della Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences di Helsinki. L'obiettivo era analizzare se e come il COIL potesse migliorare le competenze di *peer-assessment*, esaminando le relazioni tra aspetti collaborativi, interazione online e internazionalità. La ricerca, di tipo qualitativo, ha coinvolto 34 partecipanti (24 italiani e 10 finlandesi), di età compresa tra 26 e 40 anni, impegnati in attività sincrone e asincrone. I risultati evidenziano che il lavoro in gruppi internazionali è percepito come un contesto efficace per sviluppare abilità multilinguistiche, pensiero critico e collaborazione tra pari. In particolare, la dimensione internazionale favorisce il miglioramento delle capacità di *peer-assessment*, grazie al confronto con prospettive diverse che arricchiscono i processi di feedback. Inoltre, emerge una percezione positiva del COIL nella promozione di ambienti di apprendimento inclusivi, utili a preparare gli studenti alle future sfide professionali.

Keywords: higher education; peer assessment; international learning; online learning; collaborative learning

Parole chiave: istruzione universitaria; valutazione tra pari; apprendimento internazionale; apprendimento online; apprendimento collaborativo

DOI: https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.1970-2221/21511

1. Introduction

The growing emphasis on international collaboration in higher education has significantly enriched the learning experience (Hackett et al., 2023), particularly through Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL). Rooted in the social-constructivist framework of collaborative learning, COIL highlights the importance of social interaction as a key element of the learning process (Rubin & Guth, 2015). Research has shown that COIL fosters essential soft skills such as effective communication, critical thinking, and collaboration (Liu, 2023; King de Ramirez, 2021; De Castro et al., 2018). At the same time, the European Union has increasingly focused on formative assessment at all educational levels, aiming to empower students as active participants in their learning journey and to promote lifelong learning (Cefai et al., 2021), crucial for the development, maintenance and updating of professional skills (Council of the European Union, 2018). Two relevant formative assessment strategies are represented by peer- and group-assessment: but while they have been widely explored in various educational settings, its integration within COIL programs remains understudied. Kerman et al. (2023) emphasise the need for a deeper investigation to understand how these practices function in higher education. Additionally, existing research on COIL's impact highlights gaps in understanding specific strategies like peer assessment within this framework (Liu, 2023). Given these considerations, this study falls within a relatively unexplored research area and aims to highlight student's perception about the impact of international online collaboration on the development of peer-assessment strategies to foster professional skills, in higher education. On the one hand, integrating COIL and peer-assessment can enhance the potentialities of both approaches, such as the development of international communication skills and the ability to compare several points of view. On the other hand, COIL approach may also present potential challenges and limitations, such difficulties linked to multilanguage and online interaction. This research involved international students' groups from the University of Genoa, Italy, and Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences (UAS), Finland, within a COIL Project. The activity was conducted during the first semester of the 2024/2025 academic year. The students were asked to complete two questionnaires, to highlight the key aspects that contributed to enhancing their peer-assessment skills. The overall aim of this study is to explore whether and how an international online learning environment can enhance students' peer-assessment practices.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Peer-assessment and Group-assessment in higher education

To date formative assessment has become increasingly relevant. The European Union also promotes a dimension of learning in which students at all educational levels are the main players of their learning process, aiming to implement it within a lifelong learning perspective (Cefai et al., 2021). This is even more significant in higher education, where students shall be accompanied through peer-feedback to begin to: "Develop essential skills for lifelong learning, such as forming judgments or self-assessment. [..] In their future professional lives, students will need to participate in providing feedback to various stakeholders. Therefore, it is educationally beneficial to shift students' focus from seeing only teachers as feedback providers to also considering peers, more experienced students, employers, and other actors as producers and communicators of useful feedback" (Sambell et al., 2017, pp. 146 -147). Panadero et al. (2023) identified six intrapersonal factors involved in peer-assessment activities: motivation, self-efficacy, emotions, trust in oneself as an assessor, perceived fairness, and comfort; and

DOI: https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.1970-2221/21511

five interpersonal factors: social connections, trust in others as assessors, psychological safety, value alignment/diversity, and interdependence. These factors can be developed across various educational contexts, including collaborative international online environments in higher education.

In formal higher education environments, peer- and group-assessment are widely employed formative peer feedback strategies. *Peer-assessment* (PA) involves students reviewing and evaluating their peers' work according to established criteria, allowing them to provide constructive feedback. According to Biesma et al. (2019), this method helps students to critically assess the quality of their classmates' tasks, enhancing their awareness of both their own learning progress and professional growth. Similarly, van Gennip et al. (2010) describe peer assessment as an instructional tool that plays a key role in fostering learning through evaluative processes. Furthermore, Yin et al. (2022) argue that peer assessment is more than just a one-way transfer of knowledge from an expert to a learner. Conversely, it is an interactive process in which students are continuously engaged in self-evaluation and adapt their understanding within a specific learning environment. A distinct variation of peer assessment is *group-assessment* (GA), where students collaborate to evaluate and provide feedback on collective work (Baker, 2007). In this methodology students can learn from each other during collaborative work on assessment. The combination of students within groups can provide an advantage in terms of group productivity and performance or in relation to individual student learning as a result of the activity (Webb et al., 1998). This method has particularly significant advantages in educational settings that require professionals to present, defend, and discuss their instructional planning with peers (Homayouni, 2022). Essentially, group assessment fosters collaborative learning, encouraging students to mentor one another within small groups. This approach promotes a more comprehensive understanding and skill refinement compared to independent study (Asghar, 2010). Furthermore, according to Ndoye (2017), peer-feedback fosters active learning and student accountability, enhancing both their understanding of course content and their evaluation skills. In a university setting, PA and GA present numerous advantages, they significantly shape the university experience (Grion et al., 2017) by activating cognitive processes that help learners recognize and enhance their own resources (Trinchero, 2018). Firstly, PA and GA encourage students to actively engage in the learning process by critically analysing their peers' work and reflecting on evaluation criteria. Integrating self-assessment with peer-assessment can support students in making their internal feedback more explicit (Nicol & McCallum, 2022). Through guided reflective practices, they support goal setting, monitoring of progress, and planning of future actions (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). These processes encourage self-regulation and continuous improvement (Dent & Koenka, 2016; Mega et al., 2014), fostering an attitude geared toward lifelong learning and the acquisition of transferable skills (Fredriksson, 2008). This process promotes a deeper understanding of the course material and helps develop critical assessment skills (Limone, 2022). Furthermore, it encourages competent actions, making explicit and coordinating internal and external factors that sustain engagement in meaningful tasks. Considering such approaches contributes to the creation of an assessment culture that empowers and emancipates students, promoting autonomy and holistic development (Grange & Patera, 2021). Secondly, PA and GA trains students to both give and receive feedback, a crucial skill in professional environments and a key skill for graduate students (Nicol et al., 2013). Learning to provide and accept constructive criticism effectively is essential for both professional and personal development (Harris et al., 2021; King Ramirez, 2020). However, peer- and consequently group-assessment involve the simultaneous implementation of individual and group processes, requiring the establishment of appropriate monitoring systems capable of considering both individual and collective outputs and processes (Ligorio & Sansone, 2016). Other researchers mention more challenges, for example as highlighted by Boud and Molloy (2013): fostering effective collaboration can pose challenges, such as managing group dynamics and ensuring a fair evaluation of individual contributions. For this reason,

DOI: https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.1970-2221/21511

for effective PA and GA activities it is important to take into consideration the fact that evaluating others and taking on a teaching role is not a simple process. Therefore, students need to be guided and prepared through well-structured tasks to develop these skills (Hattie & Clarke, 2018).

2.2. Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL)

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) is an innovative educational approach, first introduced under this name in 2006 (Rubin, 2017). This method aims at promoting intercultural interaction and the development of global competencies among students and instructors from different nationalities. Inside this paradigm, instructors from different institutions collaborate to design and co-teach courses, allowing students from both institutions to participate (Ingram et al., 2021). As it was stated by the European Association for International Education -EAIE (Van Hove, 2019), in order to be qualified as COIL an activity shall meet four criteria:

1. *Collaboration:* instructors co-teach the module on an equal basis; students are placed in a situation where they must effectively and efficiently cooperate to produce the required outcomes.
2. *Online:* the interaction between students and instructors takes place primarily or exclusively online.
3. *Internationalization:* there is significant interaction between instructors and students from two or more different countries, leading to the development of international and intercultural competencies.
4. *Learning:* COIL modules are learning activities and should be an integral part of the curriculum, not an optional "extra" without a link whit the overall learning objectives and process.

This model has been developed over the past 15 years due to the increasing importance of higher education internationalization, which can be defined as: "The intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society." (de Wit & Hunter, 2015). Moreover, due to the challenges posed by international mobility during the pandemic, COIL has gained even greater significance as a means of support of curriculum internationalisation and, in some cases, even replacing physical mobility (Liu & Shirley, 2021). “The goal of this collaboration is to broaden students’ understanding of course content and to help them develop intercultural competencies. In doing so, COIL offers students an authentic international learning experience at their home institution rather than at an institution abroad” (Hackett et al., 2023, p. 3). As a result, it seems to provide outcomes similar to or even superior to those of physical mobility in terms of enhancing international and intercultural competencies (*ibidem*). A crucial aspect of COIL is the collaboration between educational institutions from different countries, enabling students to work together on common projects, overcoming geographical and cultural barriers (Ingram et al., 2021). Consistent with the existing academic literature (Hackett et al., 2023; King de Ramirez, 2021; De Castro et al., 2018), this type of interaction promotes the development of intercultural competencies, the ability to work in international teams, and adaptability to global contexts. The study by Hackett et al. (2023) highlighted COIL’s positive effect on the development of intercultural competencies, showing significant improvements in the intercultural skills of participating students. The COIL experience that will be described in the following paragraphs took place within the Ulysseus project: a European university alliance aimed at promoting international collaboration in higher education. One of Ulysseus’ key initiatives is the funding of COIL projects, encouraging faculty members to co-create courses that virtually connect students and instructors from different institutions. This approach seeks collaboration, to provide students with the opportunity to learn, discuss, and work together in a shared virtual space (Ulysseus, 2025). Under this point of view, COIL provides students with the opportunity to develop advanced digital skills, as the interaction primarily takes place through online platforms (de Castro et al., 2018). This aspect is particularly relevant in today's digital age, where the

DOI: https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.1970-2221/21511

ability to effectively communicate and collaborate online is essential. As COIL is a relatively new methodology, scientific literature and research are still in development (Hackett et al., 2023). Regarding peer assessment within the COIL context, research is even more limited. Although peer assessment has been widely studied in various educational settings, its specific application within COIL programs has not been sufficiently explored. The collaborative and international nature of COIL projects requires students to assess their peers' work, provide constructive feedback, and learn to receive criticism in a productive manner. Liu (2023) shows that this process not only enhances students' understanding of course material but also develops essential skills such as critical thinking and effective communication. In this regard, Kerman et al. (2023) point out that, despite their systematic review focusing on empirical studies characterised by a robust methodological framework to ensure the reliability of the results, the implementation of peer feedback in higher education requires further studies to examine the effectiveness of such practices in collaborative online learning environments. Additionally, an overview of COIL's impact on students emphasizes that, despite its potential benefits, there are still research gaps concerning specific practices such as peer assessment within COIL (Liu, 2023). Thus, there is a significant opportunity to expand research on integrating peer-assessment into COIL programs to better understand how these practices can influence student learning and the development of their professional skills.

3. Aims and research questions

The aim of this study is to investigate whether and how an international collaborative context can improve students' peer assessment practices underlying the development of their professional skills. In addition, the research aimed also to explore whether and how online activities enhance peer assessment. The overall research question can be expressed as follows: can international online collaborative activities enhance students' peer – and group- assessment practices underlying the development professional skills?
Based on the macro-objective, some sub-questions were highlighted as follows:

- RQ1 How online collaborative activities can support peer- and group-assessment practices that foster professional skills?
- RQ2 How international collaborative activities can support peer- and group-assessment practices that foster professional skills?
- RQ3 How international online activities can support peer- and group- assessment practices that foster professional skills?

4. Research design

This research can be configured according to the action-research case study model (Yin, 1994), as it involves an analytical study of the situational and environmental factors within which the research subjects live and operate, in order to describe situations and methods of intervention, contextualising the research and action activities (Trinchero, 2004).

4.1 Context of the study

This research was conducted in collaboration between the Department of Education at the University of Genoa, Italy, and Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences (UAS), Finland. The Department of Education at the University of Genoa provides programs for future teachers, social workers, early childhood educators, and managers of social services. The study took place within the two-year Master's program for students to become

DOI: https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.1970-2221/21511

coordinators of educational services. These professionals typically work as designers of adult education programs, planners of national or international educational initiatives for private and public organizations, or coordinators of social and educational services addressing areas such as early childhood, youth, and migrant support. Haaga-Helia UAS prepares future professionals for business and services focusing on topics like co-operation, entrepreneurship, innovation and internationality. This research took place within the one-year programme, in English or Finnish, to become teachers in the vocational education sector. This educational program provides a formal pedagogical qualification that qualifies individuals for teaching roles in various educational settings. Upon completion, graduates are also equipped with the expertise and competencies to work as human resource developers, consultants, or independent trainers. The students from the two courses were involved in a COIL activity during the autumn semester of 2024/2025. Throughout the course, students have participated in synchronous and asynchronous activities on the "Microsoft Teams" platform.

4.2 Participants, procedure and instruments

4.2.1 Participants

The project involved 34 students, divided into two main groups: 24 Italian students and 10 Finnish students. The socio-demographic characteristics of participants are shown in Table 1. The majority of the participants are aged between under 26 years old and 40 years old; the prevailing gender is female. Some students had prior experience working in schools or other educational settings. Few participants (1%) had prior work experience in non-school or non-educational settings; 14% of the participants had no work experience, nearly 20% had limited experience ranging from a few weeks to a few months. Two thirds of the group had more substantial experience.

Table 1

Socio-demographic characteristics of participants

Participants' Characteristics		**Italy**	**Finland**	**Total**
Gender	Male	7	3	10
	Female	16	7	23
	Not Applicable	1	0	1
Age	<26	14	5	19
	26-30	7	1	8
	31-35	0	1	1
	36-40	2	1	3
	>40	1	2	3
Working Experience	No Experience	3	2	5
	Few Weeks	1	2	2
	Few Months	3	2	5
	About 1 Year	3	0	3
	About 2 Years	3	1	4
	About 3 Years	3	0	4
	Between 3 and 6 Years	6	1	7
	Between 7 and 10 Years	0	1	1
	More than 10 Years	2	1	3
Kind of Working Experience	Kindergarten	5	3	8

DOI: https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.1970-2221/21511

Primary School	3	1	4
Secondary School	0	1	1
Communities for children	8	1	9
Communities for addictions	1	1	2
Cultural Associations	1	1	2
Disabilities	3	1	3
Not Applicable	3	2	5

4.2.2 Procedure

The procedure can be divided in two different stages: the activity stage and the research stage. Table 2 outlines the steps of the process in detail.

The activity stage took place within a course focused on professional development and adult learning, and it was structured into two primary phases, subsequently divided into two sub-phases. Throughout the courses, all students engaged in two formative assessment activities. The first phase involved a peer-assessment activity. The initial sub-phase focused on evaluative aspects. One week before the midterm of the course, each student was required to develop and submit a task randomly assigned by the teacher. They received a job aid to guide them to focus their work on drawing of a diagram that identifies, defines and illustrates the students' and others professional networks, the characteristics of adult learning and in light of the course literature, pointing out what professional skills are required in their networks and to become an adult educator. Students were also asked to be prepared to discuss their product. Once the task was submitted, students could no longer modify their work. The following week students, both from Finland and Italy, were then paired randomly and tasked with peer-assessing their partner's assignment. Feedback during this activity was written and asynchronous, provided through Teams platform, with students giving comments, identifying potential mistakes, and suggesting improvements. This feedback process was guided by a list of key questions designed by the teacher, targeting the clarity of the assignment, the clarity of the explanation, and the precision of the description. The week after, students were grouped randomly to discuss the tasks elaborated earlier. In this phase, feedback was oral, synchronous and interactive still through Teams. The second sub-phase of the peer-assessment activity emphasized metacognitive aspects. The activity was carried out separately between Finnish and Italian students. Both groups were asked to reflect on the basis of guided discussion on strength and weaknesses of their learning path during the course as part of a metacognitive question-and-answer session. After the peer-assessment activities, the teacher assigned formal grades, considering the same indicators used by the students during their feedback, but independently of the evaluations provided by them. The second phase involved a group-assessment activity, mirroring the structure of the peer-assessment phase. Students were organised into international groups of six, and each group developed an educational activity, based on PBL teaching strategy, assigned randomly from a teacher-prepared list indicating number, characteristics and needs of the target audience. They were also provided with a job aid to guide their work. Even this time, students could no longer modify their work once it had been submitted. The week after, during the evaluative sub-phase, groups were randomly paired and group members worked together, through Teams, to provide a written and asynchronous feedback on another group assignment, highlighting strengths and weaknesses. This feedback was guided by teacher-prepared questions focusing on the same aspects pointed out in the peer-assessment phase. In the metacognitive sub-phase, groups were paired in the same way as in the previous assessment activity and asked to provide oral and interactive feedback to their peers, focusing on the content of the preceding written comment. They followed a template provided by the teacher to guide and structure the discussion. Once again, the teacher assigned final grades,

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focusing on the same indicators used in the students' feedback but independently of the group evaluations. As already mentioned, the interaction between Finnish and Italian students was facilitated by the use of the "Microsoft Teams" app throughout the entire COIL activity.
The research stage was also divided into two different phases, in which students were asked to independently complete two anonymous online questionnaires. In the first step, they were asked to complete the questionnaire related to peer-assessment activities, following the corresponding activity phase. In the second step, they were required to complete the questionnaire regarding group-assessment activities at the end of that phase.

Table 2
Research process in detail

Stage	Phase/Sub – Phase		Time	Content	Modality
1st Activity Stage	Peer Assessment Activity	Evaluative Aspects	T1	Individual task	Written – Asynchronous
			T2	Peer assessment of the tasks	Written – Asynchronous
			T3	Group discussion on the tasks	Oral – Synchronous
		Metacognitive Aspects	T4	Metacognitive Q&A session	Oral – Finnish and Italians Divided
1st Research Stage	Questionnaire – Data collection		T5	Reflection on peer assessment activity	Online – Synchronous
2nd Activity Stage	Group Assessment Activity	Evaluative Aspects	T6	Group task	Written – Synchronous/ Asynchronous
			T7	Group assessment of other groups' tasks	Written – Synchronous/ Asynchronous
		Metacognitive Aspects	T8	Group discussion on the assessed tasks	Oral – Synchronous
2nd Research Stage	Questionnaire – Data collection		T9	Reflection on group assessment activity	Online – Synchronous

4.2.3 Instrument

A qualitative research approach was selected to address the research questions. It was essential to create an environment where students could openly share their experiences with COIL activities. This method was chosen to enable students to highlight both challenges and opportunities they encountered. For this reason, the research procedure included two different stages of data collection. Following 1st and 2nd activity stage, students were asked to complete an online questionnaire with both open-and-closed-ended questions related to the research objectives. The questionnaire was provided in the language used in the students' study programme, both English and Italian, and it was divided into two sections. The first section gathered demographic information about the participants through closed-ended items. The second section allowed the collection of participants' opinions in depth through three open-ended questions:

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1. Did the peer/group assessment activity give you the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues and acquire skills that you can/could use in your professional context?
2. In the peer/group assessment activity you received feedback from colleagues from different backgrounds and languages: was it effective for you? Do you think it supported your learning?
3. This learning experience with international colleagues took place online through Teams (asynchronously and synchronously). Do you think it was effective? Did the platform support your learning?

For each question the participants were asked to justify their answers. The open-ended questions were designed to address simultaneously both the evaluative sub-phase and the metacognitive sub-phase, occurred during the course's activities. The questionnaire on the peer assessment activity was completed by 34 participants, the questionnaire on the group assessment activity was completed by 31 participants.

5. Data analysis and findings

The data analysis was focused on qualitative data. The data were coded using NVivo 15 and analysed according to the Grounded Theory (GT) analysis, due to its adaptability to multiple contexts and socially constructed experiences (De La Espriella & Restrepo, 2020), such as the COIL experience. Furthermore, this approach is particularly useful with the analyses of issues from a social and cultural perspective, with a particular emphasis placed on forms of communication and language (*ibidem*). The coding process was divided into three primary stages following the principles of GT: open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Thanks to its flexibility, GT allowed researchers to integrate qualitative and quantitative findings (De La Espriella & Restrepo, 2020) by organizing the data into tables that simultaneously showcases both qualitative and quantitative results (Guetterman et al., 2015).

5.1 Qualitative findings

For the study we considered 34 statements for the first questionnaire on the PA activity and 31 statements for the second questionnaire on GA activity, corresponding to the total amount of the responses given by the participants in the two questionnaires. Each statement was considered as a text and fully segmented in clauses and sentences to create the meaning units.

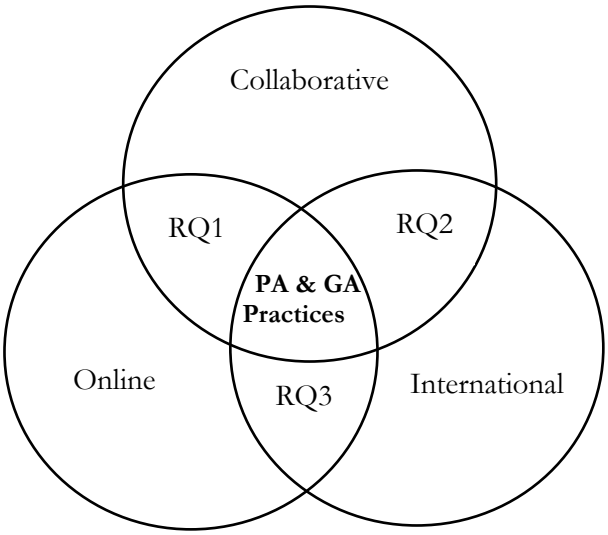
Initially, we applied an approach led by a pre-set thematic interest emerging from the research questions, in order to thoroughly differentiate participants' perceptions regarding the two types of activities proposed. Then, we generated the codes and sub-codes, directly emerging from the questionnaire data, following an inductive coding process.

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the categories from the pre-set thematic interest, showing how the key concepts were grouped and organised. The figure also highlights the relationships among the categories, which reflect the connections and dynamics identified through the qualitative analysis.

We identified three main categories, represented by three circles: "Collaborative" (at the top), "International" (on the right side), and "Online" (on the left side).

DOI: https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.1970-2221/21511

Figure 1
Data analysis diagram



The three categories encompass students' thoughts and reflections on peer- and group-assessment activities. The categories are organised into codes and subcodes resulting from the open coding process of the data directly emerging from the questionnaires, related to the peer-assessment activity and the group-assessment activity. Research focuses can be found at the intersection of the three circles (in the centre). The list of codes, sub codes and the relative frequency is detailed in Table 3 for Peer assessment activity and in Table 4 for Group assessment activity.

5.1.1 Peer assessment activity

As shown in Table 3, the International category highlights the students' perspectives on which aspects of learning can be supported by peer-assessment activities between people from different cultures and languages. The code named *"Different perspectives"* is the most relevant, with 15 occurrences. It indicates that students had the opportunity to broaden their perspectives, as highlighted by one participant: *"Having input from peers with different perspectives and experiences allowed me to see my work through fresh lenses, which broadened my understanding and highlighted areas for potential improvement that I hadn't initially considered. This diversity of insights enriched the quality of feedback and made it highly relevant and actionable, which I found beneficial for my learning and development"* (Participant 30). Other participants emphasised the activity's ability to generate helpful feedback among peers and its general perception as enriching for students. Many participants also highlighted how the activity supported the improvement of their learning, overlapping with the Collaborative category. Few critical aspects emerged in this category, with the most relevant one being represented by the code *"Linguistic barriers"* which has 8 references. Regarding this point, a student stated: *"The language barrier and lack of knowledge made interactions and, consequently, the work more difficult. The tasks were not always clear"* (Participant 24), highlighting a generalised difficulty in interaction among participants that made task development more challenging. Another critical aspect emerged is the lack of interaction between the participants.
The category named Online gathers students' reflections on which aspects of learning are enhanced by peer online activities (synchronous and asynchronous) of people from different cultural backgrounds. The students

DOI: https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.1970-2221/21511

consider the Teams platform effective to support their learning processes, with 25 references, as shown by the code *"Effectiveness"*. One participant expressed the following comment: *"The experience of collaborating with international colleagues online through Teams, both asynchronously and synchronously, was effective and greatly supported my learning"* (Participant 9). The participants also highlighted some organisational issues related to the online activities, represented by three subcodes. The most representative one, called *"Strengths"*, captured ideas about the positive contributions made by Teams platform to the organisation and development of the activities. In this regard, a student said: *"Teams was effective because the platform facilitated collaboration and discussion, allowing for both synchronous and asynchronous interactions, which proved advantageous for adapting to different time zones and individual schedules"* (Participant 16). The other two subcodes highlighted the flexibility allowed by using Teams, but also some difficulties related with the tool functioning.

The Collaborative category highlights the participants' thoughts on what aspects of online activities, lessons, and courses can foster peer assessment practices. The most representative code is *"Improving learning"*, with 22 references. The students mostly appreciated peer-assessment activity because it represented a way of working that broadened their skills and knowledge through a bottom-up approach, as well as offering a future-oriented perspective. One student stated: *"Yes, the peer assessment activities were very effective in acquiring professional skills, learning from each other's experiences, and collaborating together for social learning. For example, formal and informal learning, examples, and experiences from different peers enhance learning experiences"* (Participant 32). Another significant aspect is represented by the code called *"Collaborative skills"* (12 occ.), thanks to the opportunity given to experiment and develop these key skills for the students' future profession, as expressed by a participant: *"These collaborative experiences and the feedback skills developed are highly transferable to my professional interactions, where teamwork, openness to diverse viewpoints, and constructive critique are essential"* (Participant 27). Other positive aspects highlighted are the possibility to enhance critical thinking and the improving of consciousness about the students' skills and work outputs, as well as assessment skills. A very limited number of participants, highlight that the activity wasn't able to improve their learning process (2 occ.).

Table 3

Peer assessment codes and sub-codes

Category	Code/sub-code		Frequency
International	Different perspectives		15
	Helpful feedback		10
	Improving learning		10
	Enriching		10
	Linguistic Barriers		8
	Lack of interaction		7
	Linguistic skills		7
	Future perspectives		4
	Adaptive skills		2
	Responsibility		2
	Not improving learning		1
Online	Effectiveness		25
	Organisational issues	Difficulties	6
		Flexibility	7
		Strength	10

DOI: https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.1970-2221/21511

	Interaction	8
	Digital literacy	2
Collaborative	Improving Learning	22
	Collaborative skills	12
	Critical thinking	7
	Consciousness	3
	Assessment skills	3
	Not improving	2
	Engagement	1

5.1.2 Group assessment activity

Table 4 shows the codes related to the group-assessment activity. The category named International emphasises the participants' perception on how group-assessment activities can support various aspects of learning when involving individuals from diverse cultures and languages. As for the peer activity, the most representative code is *"Different perspectives"*, which was mentioned 18 times. This highlights how the group activity, according to students, also gave the possibility to engage with diverse perspectives, broadening their existing ones. An interesting comment from a participant illustrates this: *"It certainly expanded the range of perspectives on the issues we study, which tend to be limited when discussing only with Italians (possibly from the same region)"* (Participant 13). In general, the group activity was considered effective by the students, who expressed positive opinions about its ability to enhance their learning process. This is highlighted in the code *"Improving learning"*. On this subject, a participant stated: *"It supported the learning by suggesting ways to improve the content"* (Participant 26). Other positive aspects also emerged, such as its enriching nature, its usefulness for developing perspectives related to future professional roles, and its ability to provide helpful feedback to guide one's work or activities. On the other hand, some critical aspects were also identified, such as the code *"Linguistic barriers",* cited 12 times. As it was previously noted in the peer activity, different language proficiency levels were perceived as a significant factor affecting the activity. One student remarked: *"The participants have very variable language skills"* (Participant 25). Another critical issue that emerged was the presence of some organizational gaps in managing the tasks. The Online category also focuses on gathering participants' perspectives on which aspects of learning are enhanced in online activities involving students with different cultural backgrounds, in this case conducted in groups. Similarly, Teams was considered an effective tool for supporting the activity, with 21 references. A student's comment illustrates this: *"Yes, the platform was very helpful for interacting with international colleagues as it helped us collaborating for different tasks and working together as a team and learning from each other"* (Participant 20). The code *"Organisational issues"* is also applied to the group activity, which included four sub-codes. Among these, it was noted that the Teams platform functioned better for conducting asynchronous activities. Another interesting aspect is represented by the code *"Interaction"*, as it was highlighted by a participant: *"Teams provided useful tools for collaboration, such as file sharing, chats, and video calls, which facilitated discussions among participants"* (Participant 11). This underlines how students perceived the range of tools provided by the Teams app as suitable for supporting collaborative interaction and group work. The most relevant characteristics in fostering students' professional skills related to the Collaborative category are represented by the code *"Collaborative skills"* (9 occ.). For instance, a participant stated: *"Yes, the peer assessment for group activity was effective in enhancing collaboration"* (Participant 17). Furthermore, group activity was generally considered effective in improving learning.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.1970-2221/21511

Table 4

Group assessment codes and sub-codes

Category	Code/sub-code		Frequency
International	Different perspectives		18
	Improving learning		12
	Linguistic Barriers		12
	Helpful feedback		7
	Not improving		5
	Organisational lacks		5
	Enriching		3
	Future perspectives		3
	Critical thinking		3
	Linguistic skills		2
Online	Effectiveness		21
	Organisational issues	Strength	7
		Difficulties	7
		Flexibility	2
		Better asynchronous	1
	Interaction		6
	Group approaches		4
	Improving learning		3
	Sharing experiences		2
	Problem solving		1
Collaborative	Improving Learning		13
	Collaborative skills		9
	Critical thinking		4
	Not improving		3
	Consciousness		3
	Socialisation		2
	Problem solving		2
	Assessment skills		1
	Challenging		1
	Engagement		1

5.2 Quali - quantitative comparison between Italian and Finnish perspectives

Table 5 presents the data related to the qualitative analysis, from a quantitative perspective (Young, 1981; Green, 2001; Srnka & Koeszegi, 2007). Since the questions were open-ended, it was important to emphasise the percentages of respondents who quoted a specific code, thereby underlining its significance. As shown in the following table, we indicated the percentage of students who mentioned that topic, divided based on the demographic variable "Affiliated University". Additionally, we analysed the differences between the percentages related to the number of references and the corpus coverage to verify the significance of the main categories. With reference to the aspects related to the peer-assessment activity within the International category, students from

DOI: https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.1970-2221/21511

Haaga-Helia UAS (HH-UAS) reported the perceived feedback as particularly helpful. Conversely, students from the University of Genoa (UNIGE) primarily regarded the activity as enriching, highlighting its ability to enhance their learning process and improve their English language skills. On one hand, students from both Universities emphasised the activity's potential to expose participants to diverse perspectives; on the other hand, linguistic barriers were identified as a critical challenge. From another critical standpoint, UNIGE students expressed a perceived lack of interaction with their peers during the activity. In the Online category, students from both universities considered Microsoft Teams an effective tool in supporting the peer assessment activity. However, this aspect was particularly emphasised by students from UNIGE, who also highlighted the platform's ability to foster interaction among participants. Students from HH-UAS placed greater emphasis on the code labelled *"organisational issues*." They particularly expressed, to a greater extent than their Italian counterparts, an appreciation for sub-codes referring to the platform's strengths in supporting the activity and its ability to enhance flexibility. With reference to the Collaborative category, students from both universities agreed that this approach is useful for improving learning process, collaborative skills, and critical thinking. Interestingly, the activity's potential to enhance students' evaluative skills was recognised exclusively by students from HH-UAS. Focusing on the group-assessment activity within the International category, students from both universities agreed in perceiving the activity as beneficial for improving their learning process, gaining diverse perspectives, and recognising linguistic barriers. The latter two points were particularly emphasised by students from HH-UAS. However, a subset of HH-UAS students diverged from this consensus, stating that the activity did not contribute to improving their learning. On the other hand, consistent with their experience in the peer-assessment activity, HH-UAS students highlighted the usefulness of the feedback received during group-assessment. Conversely, students from UNIGE emphasised the development of linguistic skills, aligning with their observations in the previous activity, though to a lesser extent. In the Online category, both groups of students perceived the activity as effectively supported by the Teams platform. However, this perception was more strongly highlighted by HH-UAS participants, who also underlined the platform's ability to develop problem-solving skills, an element not noted by UNIGE students. Additionally, HH-UAS students, referencing the subcode "Better Asynchronous," expressed that Teams more effectively facilitates asynchronous activities. In contrast, UNIGE students pointed to diverse approaches within workgroups and identified strengths related to the subcode "Strengths" under "Organisational Issues." These observations diverged from those of their HH-UAS counterparts. In the Group Activity category, HH-UAS students perceived this aspect as beneficial in supporting their learning process. They also highlighted the activity's ability to enhance problem-solving skills, mirroring their observations in the Online category, an aspect not noted by UNIGE students. Conversely, UNIGE students emphasised the activity's capacity to foster a sense of self-consciousness. Students from both universities agreed on the activity's effectiveness in enhancing collaborative skills and promoting socialisation.

Table 5

Quali-quantitative comparison of Italian and Finnish perspectives

Activity	Category	Codes/Sub codes	Affiliated University	
			Genoa (It)	Haaga Helia (Fin)
Peer	International	Helpful feedback	6.98%	31.82%
		Enriching	23.26%	0.00%
		Different Perspectives	20.93%	18.18%
		Improving Learning	18.60%	9.09%

DOI: https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.1970-2221/21511

		Linguistic Barriers		13.95%	9.09%
		Linguistic Skills		13.95%	4.55%
		Lack of interaction		13.95%	4.44%
	Online	Effectiveness		44.19%	27.27%
		Interaction		16.26%	4.55%
		Organisational Issues	Strengths	11.63%	18.18%
			Flexibility	6.98%	13.64%
	Collaborative	Improving Learning		30.24%	40.91%
		Collaborative skills		16.28%	18.18%
		Critical Thinking		11.63%	9.09%
		Assessment Skills		0.0%	9.09%
Group	International	Different Perspectives		18.6%	27.27%
		Helpful Feedback		4.65%	22.73%
		Improving Learning		18.6%	18.18%
		Linguistic Barriers		11.83%	18.18%
		Not Improving		2.33%	18.18%
		Linguistic Skills		4.64%	0.0%
	Online	Effectiveness		27.91%	40.91%
		Group Approaches		6.98%	0.00%
		Problem Solving		0.00%	4.55%
		Organisational Issues	Strengths	13.95%	4.55%
			Better Asynchronous	0.00%	4.55%
	Collaborative	Improving Learning		13.95%	31.82%
		Collaborative Skills		11.63%	13.64%
		Problem solving		0.00%	9.09%
		Consciousness		6.98%	0.00%
		Socialisation		2.33%	4.55%

6. Discussion

This study aimed to explore whether international online collaborative activities, as part of a COIL experience, could enhance the students' peer- and group-assessment skills. Using the Grounded Theory approach, the analysis helped the researchers to find out some interesting qualitative and quantitative findings to address the six research questions, providing insights into how these activities foster learning among students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

With reference to online collaborative activities supporting peer- and group-assessment practices (RQ1), the findings indicate that online lessons and courses were perceived as effective in sustaining assessment to foster the development of professional skills, particularly through the use of Microsoft Teams. Participants from both Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences (HH-UAS) and the University of Genoa (UNIGE) emphasised the platform's effectiveness in enabling both synchronous and asynchronous collaboration. This adaptability helped overcome logistical challenges, such as time zone differences, and fostered meaningful interactions. The organisational strengths of Teams, its flexibility and user-friendly tools for file sharing, chats, and video calls, were highly appreciated, creating a supportive environment for structured peer- and- group-assessment pro-

DOI: https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.1970-2221/21511

cesses. With a specific focus on group-assessment, HH-UAS students highlighted the platform's role in enhancing asynchronous collaboration and problem-solving activities (Drigas & Karyotaki, 2016), while UNIGE participants placed greater emphasis on the diversity of approaches within workgroups, recognising that varying organisational practices enriched their learning experience.

To explore how international collaborative activities can foster peer- and group-assessment practices (RQ2), the findings show that such activities enriched students' learning experiences and professional skills by exposing them to diverse perspectives. The code *"Different perspectives"* was particularly prominent, indicating that feedback from peers with varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Harris et al., 2021; King de Ramirez, 2020) was perceived as broadening students' understanding and improving their critical thinking. As one participant stated, these activities allowed them to view their work through "fresh lenses", uncovering areas for improvement. Students also reported enhancements in collaborative skills, critical thinking, and professional development, as already indicated by Harris et al. (2021), Limone (2022), and King de Ramirez (2020). Similarly, group-assessment activities were widely perceived as beneficial for fostering collaboration and socialisation. Both HH-UAS and UNIGE students agreed on these benefits, though their emphasis differed: HH-UAS participants highlighted the activities' ability to enhance problem-solving skills, while UNIGE students focused more on the development of self-awareness. HH-UAS particularly appreciated the feedback exchange occurred during group-assessment activity, already highlighted as a key competence for graduated students by Nicol et al. (2013). Nevertheless, linguistic barriers and limited interaction, especially noted by UNIGE students, were perceived as challenges that hindered the full potential of international collaborative activities in supporting assessment practices, especially during the peer-assessment activity.

Regarding the promotion of peer- and group-assessment practices through online international activities (RQ3), these experiences were perceived as useful for supporting new skills acquisition, critical thinking, and self-awareness, as stated by the American Council on Education (2016) and Hildeblando & Finardi (2018). HH-UAS students particularly recognised the potential of these activities to enhance evaluative skills, reflecting their focus on professional applications, while UNIGE students perceived them useful for improving their English language skills and fostering a deeper understanding of their own capabilities. Both groups agreed on the activities' capacity to develop collaborative competencies and socialisation, though some participants expressed the need for more dynamic interactions to maximize these benefits. Moreover, the group-assessment activity was perceived as particularly enriching by the students, by exposing them to diverse perspectives, a recurring theme across both assessment strategies. HH-UAS students emphasised the value of this exposure, while some participants also reported that the activities did not significantly improve their learning, a divergence from the general consensus. UNIGE students again highlighted linguistic development during group-assessment, albeit to a lesser extent than in peer-assessment activities. Overall, both groups acknowledged the role of international online activities in enhancing collaborative skills and fostering a sense of community.

Concluding, the findings suggest that international online collaborative activities are perceived as able to enhance students' peer assessment skills. The students' perception indicates that these activities provide valuable opportunities for participants to broaden their perspectives by engaging with peers from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. They improve collaborative and critical thinking skills and foster a greater awareness of self-learning process and professional development. Students from Haaga-Helia UAS, in particular, reported that peer assessment activities enhanced their evaluative skills, highlighting the usefulness of feedback in refining their work, confirming what already highlighted by Nicol et al. (2013), but within COIL project. Furthermore, the use of online platforms such as Microsoft Teams was considered effective in facilitating both synchronous and asynchronous collaboration, supporting flexibility and interaction among participants. While linguistic

DOI: https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.1970-2221/21511

barriers and organisational challenges were considered as constraints, the overall findings underscore the potential of international online collaborative activities to create enriching environments where students can learn from one another and develop essential peer assessment competencies. These activities not only enhance academic learning but also prepare students for future professional contexts by developing transferable skills like giving and receiving constructive feedback.
Therefore, the general research question can be answered affirmatively: international online collaborative activities do enhance students' peer- and group-assessment skills, particularly by promoting intercultural exchange, critical thinking, and effective use of digital tools for collaboration.

7. Limitation of the study

The study has some potential structural limitations that may have influenced its findings. Firstly, the limited number of students involved, the two cultural contexts (Finnish and Italian), as well as its application in two academic curricula oriented toward educational and teaching professions, may reduce the possibility to find out similar context, to experiment transferability of the result. Secondly, the course for Italian students was conducted in a blended format, and many of the Italian participants already knew each other beforehand, which likely facilitated interaction, participation, and communication. Nevertheless, this previous familiarity and the frequent use of Italian during discussions among Italian students could have acted as a deterrent for participation, motivation, sharing, and feedback reception from Finnish students. Moreover, the voluntary nature of the Italian students' participation meant that people joining the activity were more likely to have an open and proactive mindset toward international experiences and peer group work, potentially skewing the results. Another factor to take into consideration is the random allocation of students to groups, which may have partially influenced their level of tasks' perceived effectiveness and collaboration within the groups. This could be due to the variability in language proficiency and disciplinary expertise among group members that may have created imbalances that affected the dynamics and overall group performance. A further limitation is using self-reported data given by the students: the study mainly focused on collecting students' perceptions of the process; further tools are required to examine its wider cognitive, behavioural, and emotional impacts on peer- and group-assessment skills. Additionally, the cultural and institutional contexts of HH-UAS and UNIGE may limit the generalisability of the findings. Further research could explore similar activities across a broader range of institutions to validate and extend these results.

8. Conclusions and implications for policies and practices

The findings highlight the potential of international online collaborative activities to enhance peer- and group-assessment practices by using digital platforms like Teams. These activities foster critical thinking, self-awareness, and professional skills, while also exposing students to diverse perspectives. However, challenges such as linguistic barriers and limited interaction highlight areas which could be improved. Future initiatives could focus on strategies to enhance communication and engagement, such as incorporating more interactive tasks or providing additional language support. The COIL experience demonstrates the value of international online collaborative activities in enhancing students' peer- and group-assessment skills; and offering practical recommendations for teachers and organisers of such activities, including: scaffolding feedback to support students to complete their tasks; providing language support to enhance the communication and feedback exchange within groups; and designing structured synchronous sessions to promote collaborative and participative dynamics. By fostering a learning environment that bridges cultural and linguistic differences, these activities can contribute to the development of essential skills for future professionals. The findings highlight the importance

DOI: https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.1970-2221/21511

of effective digital tools and structured interactions in maximizing the benefits of such initiatives, paving the way for more inclusive and significant collaborative learning experiences. Hopefully in the future, further studies will be conducted in this field to analyse the phenomenon from a broader perspective, to make generalisations of the findings more independent from the cultural and institutional context of the two Universities involved in the study.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.1970-2221/21511