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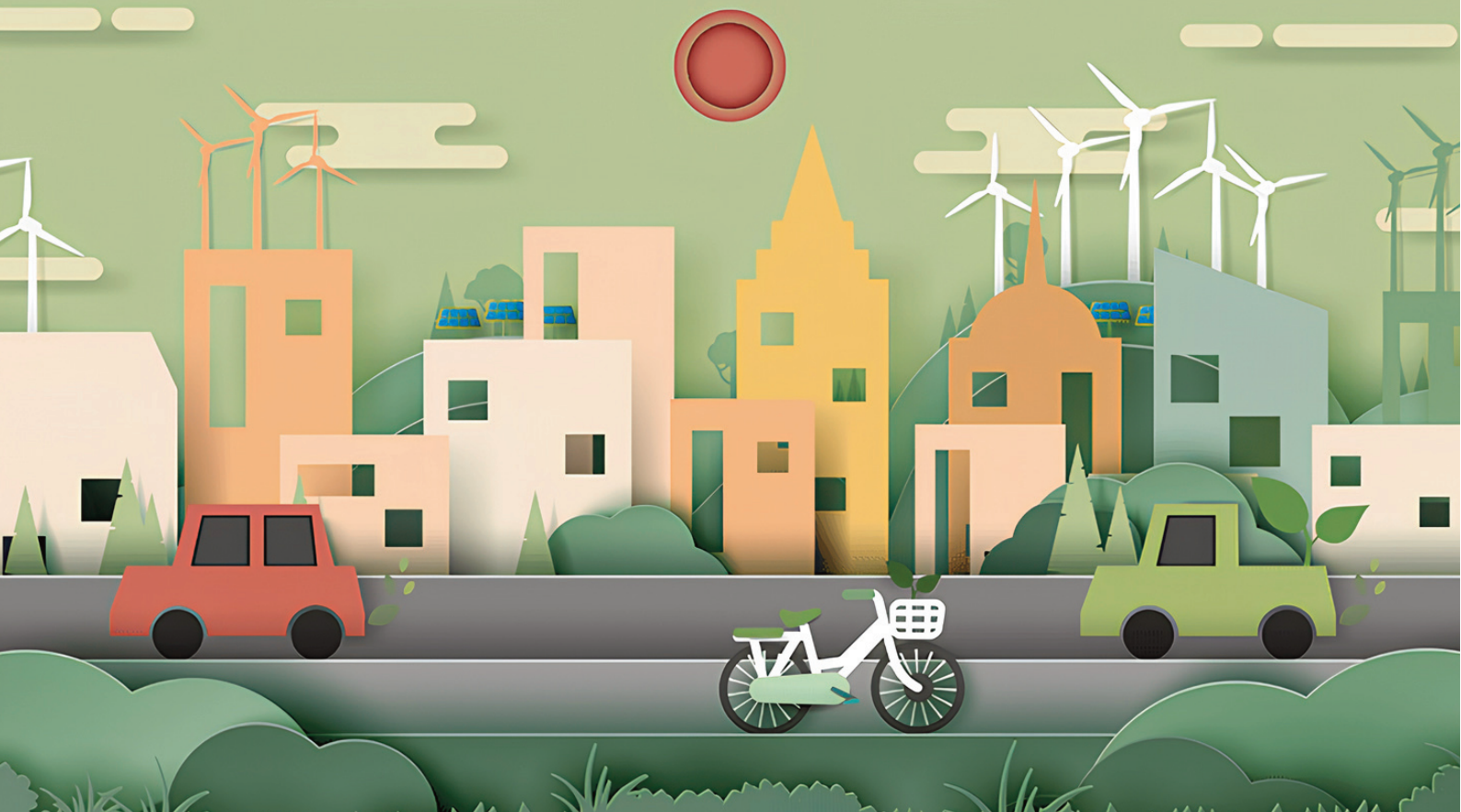
Guidelines for Designing and Implementing a Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) in Integrated Planning



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1 Introduction: The Imperative of Transnational Pedagogical Innovation

The contemporary educational landscape is increasingly characterised by a compelling need for innovative pedagogical approaches that transcend traditional disciplinary and geographical boundaries. In such a context, Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) emerges as a particularly salient model offering a structured yet dynamic avenue for fostering global competencies within higher education curricula. This comprehensive guide, informed by insights derived from the pilot application of a COIL course within the InPlanEd Research Project, aims to delineate a robust framework for the effective design and implementation of such initiatives, specifically within the complex and inherently interdisciplinary thematic area of Integrated Planning.

Indeed, the challenges confronting urban environments globally – encompassing issues such as unsustainable urbanisation, climate change adaptation, resource management, and socio-spatial inequalities – are demonstrably transnational in scope. As a result, the development of solutions necessitates a cadre of professionals equipped with not only technical proficiencies but also sophisticated intercultural communication skills, collaborative acumen, and a systemic understanding of interconnected global phenomena. COIL, by its very design, serves as a potent mechanism for cultivating these essential attributes, thereby transforming the educational experience from one of mere knowledge acquisition to one of active, collaborative knowledge co-creation.

Concerning the structure of this guide, it is based on three pivotal dimensions, each critical to the successful organization and implementation of a COIL module:

1. Content Architecture: Examining the principles governing the pedagogical coherence and thematic integration of course material.

2. Groupwork Dynamics: Analysing strategies for optimising collaborative engagement and fostering equitable participation among diverse student cohorts.

3. Operational Modalities: Addressing the practical considerations pertinent to the seamless delivery and logistical management of online international learning.

Through a rigorous exploration of these dimensions, this guide seeks to furnish educators with actionable recommendations, grounded in empirical observation and pedagogical theory, for constructing COIL modules in Integrated Planning that are not merely functional but genuinely transformative in their educational impact.

2 Main Dimensions

2.1. Content Architecture

The intellectual scaffolding of any academic programme resides fundamentally in its content architecture. In the context of a COIL module, particularly within a field as expansive and intricate as Integrated Planning, the meticulous structuring of content assumes significance. Observations from the pilot phase revealed instances where the course structure, despite its inherent strengths, exhibited a degree of fragmentation. The objective, therefore, is to articulate strategies for weaving a cohesive and impactful learning experience, ensuring that every constituent element contributes synergistically to the overarching educational objectives.
Taking that into account, some main directions concerning the structure of such a module are presented below:

2.1.1. The Unifying Narrative Thread: A Framework for Cognitive Integration

A cornerstone of pedagogical coherence, particularly within a COIL module, is the deliberate integration of a **unifying narrative thread**. This concept transcends mere thematic alignment; it constitutes an overarching intellectual and practical armature that systematically interlinks all constituent components of the course, from formal lectures and seminars to collaborative assignments. It serves as the cognitive spine, providing a cohesive structure that facilitates deeper student engagement and comprehension.

Such a structural coherence becomes even more critical in COIL environments. In conventional educational settings, the inherent interpersonal contact between students and instructors often compensates for subtle structural problems. However, in a COIL environment, where initial face-to-face interaction is attenuated , this narrative cohesion seems to be quite important. Its absence can lead to a perception of disconnected learning modules, thereby diminishing student motivation and the efficacy of knowledge transfer. To gain this goal, some strategies that may enhance a unifying narrative are the ones presented below:

- **Establish a Central Thematic Framework:** The course should revolve around a quite specific multifaceted problem or challenge, within integrated planning that possesses demonstrable relevance across diverse cultural contexts. For example, rather than a generic "urban planning" focus, a more potent theme might be "Sustainable Urban Resilience in Coastal Megacities" or "Equitable Urban Development in Rapidly Globalising Economies." This thematic core functions as the intellectual anchor for the entire module.
- **Systematic Alignment of Components:** Each pedagogical component, whether it is a lecture, an assigned reading, a discussion forum, or a practical exercise, must be explicitly mapped to the overarching narrative. This ensures that every session is perceived as a logical progression within a coherent intellectual trajectory, fostering a cumulative learning experience.
- **Focus on Case Study:** A highly effective approach involves anchoring the entire module around a specific, real-world case study. This could involve a particular urban area grappling

with a defined set of challenges (e.g., post-industrial areas (brownfields) regeneration, climate-induced migration, or smart city implementation). The case study provides a tangible, empirical context for theoretical discussions and practical problem-solving.

• **Reinforcement of the Main Theme through Repetition:** The unifying narrative should not be a singular introductory statement. It must be consistently reiterated and reinforced at the beginning of each module, linking new content explicitly to the central theme. Furthermore, students should be prompted to reflect on how each knowledge segment contributes to the overarching narrative, thereby internalising the interconnectedness of the curriculum.

• **Fostering Cumulative and Interdisciplinary Learning:** : In combination with the previous strategy, a well-articulated narrative encourages students to synthesise knowledge across disparate disciplinary domains – urban economics, environmental science, socio-cultural studies, policy analysis, community engagement and participatory techniques, as well as design principles – thereby cultivating a holistic understanding of urban systems. This transcends rote memorisation, fostering a deeper recognition of intricate systematic relationships.

• **Emphasising Applied Relevance:** Integrated planning is an inherently applied discipline. The narrative thread must consistently underscore the practical implications of theoretical constructs, demonstrating how academic knowledge translates into tangible solutions for urban challenges. This cultivates a strong sense of purpose and agency among participants.

To conclude, by meticulously crafting a unifying narrative as the main theme of a COIL module, it transcends a mere aggregation of topics, evolving into a coherent and purposeful intellectual journey. This approach not only enhances content retention but also cultivates a profound sense of direction and engagement, ultimately enriching the students' educational experience.

2.1.2. Horizontally Integrated Structure: Synthesising Theory and Practice

Building upon the foundation of a unifying narrative **(Section 2.1.1), the adoption of a horizontally integrated structure** becomes a key pedagogical imperative. This structural principle dictates that weekly theoretical content is explicitly and directly aligned with the progressive stages of the final group assignment. It represents a deliberate pedagogical strategy to ensure that learning is not compartmentalised but rather flows seamlessly from conceptual understanding to practical application.

Analogous to the sequential phases of a complex engineering project, where each stage builds upon the preceding one, a horizontally integrated COIL module ensures that every lecture, seminar, and group activity serves a clearly defined purpose within the overall course trajectory. In that way, it is easy ensured the continuity between theory and practice, as students are not merely exposed to abstract concepts; they are actively engaged in their application to authentic urban challenges. This cultivates a deeper, more nuanced understanding and underscores the direct relevance of academic learning to professional practice.

Below, some operational strategies for promoting horizontally integrated structure are presented:

• **Decomposition of the Final Assignment:** The comprehensive group assignment should be systematically disaggregated into smaller, sequential milestones. In case the coursework is selected to be an integrated urban plan, it might entail distinct phases such as: (a) contextual analysis and problem identification; (b) data collection; (c) analytical stage; (d) conceptual framework development and strategic formulation (scenarios may be de-

veloped); (e) assessment or scenarios' evaluation; (f) detailed design proposals and implementation strategies; (g) final presentation and critical evaluation.

• **Synchronised Content Delivery:** Each weekly meeting (lecture and/or instructional unit) should deliver the precise theoretical knowledge and practical skills requisite for the impending project milestone. For instance, if a milestone necessitates advanced spatial analysis, the preceding week's curriculum should comprehensively cover relevant Geographic Information Systems (GIS) techniques, data sources, and analytical methodologies. Such a design strategy is known as "just-in-time" teaching; according to the supporters of this teaching method, cognitive overload by the students is limited while also enabling the knowledge to be put into practice directly.

• **Integration of Formative Assessment and Reflective Tasks:** When each instructional session is finished, incorporate brief, low-stakes formative assessments or structured reflective tasks can be mapped in the module timetable. These serve a dual purpose: (a) consolidation of newly acquired knowledge and (b) provision of opportunities for metacognitive self-evaluation.

  o **Reflective Prompts:** Students can be prompted to summarise key takeaways, articu-

late the relevance of content to their project, or identify areas of conceptual ambiguity.

o Short Quizzes/Polls: Rapid, diagnostic assessments to gauge comprehension and identify com

o Peer Review of Milestone Drafts: Facilitate structured peer feedback on preliminary drafts of project milestones, fostering collaborative learning and iterative improvement.

Taking the above into consideration, a cohesive and purposeful learning environment may be cultivated, through aligning content with milestones of the coursework as well as integrating regular opportunities for reflection and feedback. This dynamic system ensures a reciprocal relationship where theoretical understanding informs practical application, and practical experience reinforces theoretical constructs. As a result, demonstrable real-world applicability may be easier achieved.

2.1.3. Establishing Purpose and Relevance: Articulating the COIL Value Proposition

Student engagement and their active participation are important in order for a COIL module to be a successful one. To enhance such an activity, it is crucial to articulate, in a clear way, the **purpose and relevance of transnational and inter-institutional collaboration**. While educators may inherently grasp the profound value of such initiatives, students -particularly in the beginning of the term/semester-, may legitimately question the rationale for partnering with a foreign institution. Addressing this potential query directly and comprehensively, from the initial stages, is paramount to fostering intrinsic motivation and deep learning. Some strategies for articulating the “why” of COIL are summarized as follow:

• **Early and Consistent Communication:** The rationale for COIL must be articulated not as an afterthought, but as a foundational principle, integrated into modules’ syllabi, introductory sessions, and ongoing communications. This proactive approach ensures students are fully apprised of the pedagogical intent from the outset.

• **Highlighting Common Urban Challenges:** Emphasise that the complex urban challenges addressed within Integrated Planning – e.g., climate change adaptation, housing affordability, sustainable mobility, or heritage conservation – are not confined by national borders (see also in Section 2.1.1). They represent shared global phenomena, albeit manifesting with unique local specificities. Taking that into consideration, tutors may underline:

o Comparative Analysis as a Learning Tool: Frame the COIL experience as an unparalleled opportunity for comparative analysis. Students are not merely studying urban planning principles; they are critically examining how diverse socio-cultural, political, and economic contexts influence the conceptualisation and implementation of these principles. This fosters a nuanced understanding of global interconnectedness and the intrinsic value of varied perspectives.

o Professional Relevance: Underscore that contemporary professional practice in integrated planning increasingly demands collaborative engagement across disciplinary, sectoral, and international boundaries. COIL provides a simulated yet authentic environment for developing these critical collaborative competencies.

• **Showcasing Unique Learning Outcomes:** Beyond the acquisition of specific planning methodologies, tutors need to highlight the transversal skills cultivated through COIL:

o Intercultural Communication Competence: Navigating diverse communication styles, cultural norms, and academic conventions.

o Global Citizenship: Developing a sophisticated understanding of global issues and their

localised manifestations, fostering a sense of responsibility towards a shared planetary future.

o Collaborative Problem-Solving: Learning to synthesise disparate perspectives and leverage team heterogeneity to generate more robust and innovative solutions.

o Digital Collaboration Proficiency: Mastering the use of advanced online platforms and tools for effective teamwork in a virtual environment.

• **Integration of Expert Perspectives:** Incorporate guest lectures or panel discussions featuring practitioners or academics from both partner countries (and potentially other international contexts) who can speak directly to the global nature of integrated planning challenges and the tangible benefits of international collaboration. Case studies that explicitly compare and contrast approaches across different nations can further solidify this understanding.

• **Leveraging Student Testimonials:** Where available, sharing testimonials from alumni of previous COIL modules conducted. Such an approach may be highly effective in illustrating the transformative impact of the international dimension on their learning trajectories and professional aspirations.

Having all the above in mind, it is underlined that strategic communication fosters a sense of satisfaction in their chosen module type and establishes a fertile ground for deeper, more meaningful engagement throughout the module.

2.1.4. Integrating In-Person Engagement: The International Week as a High-Impact Experiential Learning Opportunity

While the "Online" component is intrinsic to COIL, the strategic integration of an in-person engagement – typically structured as an "International Week" – can profoundly augment the pedagogical efficacy of the module. This is not just a logistical addendum but a pedagogically purposeful event, thoughtfully integrated into the module as a key milestone in the overall learning journey.

The reasons why such an “International Week” seems to be important are related to the points below:

• **Reinforce Practical Relevance through Site-Specific Immersion:** By conducting a focused, site-specific case study within the host city, students gain direct, empirical exposure to the real-world complexities of urban planning challenges. This is where abstract theoretical constructs are confronted with tangible realities.

• **Deepen Intercultural and Experiential Dimensions:** While virtual interactions are valuable, the richness of face-to-face encounters is unparalleled. Shared meals, navigating an unfamiliar urban environment, and direct social interaction significantly strengthen interpersonal bonds and cultivate a more profound appreciation of cultural nuances.

• **Culminate in Professional Presentations:** Enabling students to present their interim project findings to a broader audience – potentially comprising local experts, academic faculty, or municipal stakeholders – imbues the experience with a heightened sense of professional realism and accountability. Such an activity also makes students perceive that their coursework is taken into consideration by local authorities and academic community; it is a fact that increase their self-esteemed and the enhance their good opinions about the module.

• **Facilitate Intensive Collaborative Design Workshops:** Certain facets of integrated planning, particularly those involving urban design, conceptualisation, and iterative problem-solving, benefit immensely from immediate, face-to-face interaction, brainstorming, and real-time feedback. The dynamic energy of a shared physical space can produce creative breakthroughs.

• **Serve as a Critical Project Checkpoint:** It provides an opportune moment for international project groups to convene physically, review progress, engage in intensive collaborative work, and make pivotal decisions that may be challenging to achieve asynchronously.

In order for an “International Week” to be designed, attention should be paid at these issues:

• **Singular, Site-Specific Case Study:** The focus should be on a single, well-defined urban area within the host city. This concentrated approach facilitates in-depth analysis and avoids superficial engagement. For instance, a case study might explore a specific neighbourhood's vulnerability to climate impacts and the local adaptation strategies being implemented.

• **Structured On-Site Visits:** Direct engagement with the physical environment is necessary. Tutors are responsible for organizing guided tours led by local practitioners (e.g., urban planners, architects, community leaders) who can provide expert commentary and contextual insights. Students should be encouraged to engage in (mainly) qualitative data collection through observation, photographic documentation, innovative applications through smart devices, and informal interactions with local inhabitants.

• **Expert Engagement and Dialogue:** It is crucial to facilitate structured interactions with local professionals, policymakers, community representatives, and academics. These direct encounters offer authentic perspectives and invaluable networking opportunities. This could take the form of panel discussions, Q&A sessions, or dedicated critique sessions where local experts provide feedback on student project progress.

• **Dedicated Collaborative Work Time:** Tutors should need to allocate substantial time for groups to work intensively on their projects in co-located physical spaces. The presence of instructors as facilitators during these sessions is crucial for guiding discussions, resolving conflicts, and providing immediate feedback.

• **Pre- and Post-Week Integration:**
  - **o Pre-Week Briefing:** Thoroughly COIL module organizers/tutors have to prepare students for the International Week, covering logistical arrangements, cultural expectations, and academic objectives.
  - **o Post-Week Reflection:** Structured reflective activities subsequent to the International Week may be integrated to the curiculum, prompting students to articulate how the in-person experience deepened their understanding and influenced their project development.

• **Logistics and Risk Management:** International travel necessitates rigorous planning concerning travel arrangements, accommodation, visa requirements, insurance, and the establishment of comprehensive emergency protocols. Financial transparency regarding costs and potential funding opportunities is also essential. It should be underlined that all the Information about the trip needs to be provided to the students before their enrollment to the module.To conclude, an “International Week” event may be considered as an opportunity for immersive, experiential learning. It serves as a potent capstone or pivotal mid-point experience, solidifying interpersonal relationships, deepening contextual understanding, and imbuing the COIL journey with a tangible, unforgettable dimension. It bridges the virtual and the real, making the learning profoundly resonant.

2.1.5. Ongoing Dialogue and Adaptive Feedback: Cultivating a Responsive Learning Ecosystem

The final, yet equally critical, dimension of content architecture pertains to the establishment of **ongoing dialogue with both students and co-instructors regarding the module structure**. This represents a commitment to continuous quality improvement, fostering a responsive learning ecosystem that can adapt to emergent challenges

and evolving participant needs. In the dynamic context of COIL, rigidity can be detrimental to pedagogical efficacy.
Some strategies to foster continuous dialogue include:

- **Systematic Student Feedback Mechanisms:**
  - **o Dedicated Online Forum:** Establishing a specific online channel (e.g., a discussion board, a dedicated chat group) for students to openly submit feedback, pose questions about the course structure, or raise concerns.
  - **o Mid-Course Formative Surveys:** Developing brief, anonymous surveys at strategic junctures (e.g., mid-semester) to gather insights on workload, clarity of instructions, effectiveness of group dynamics, and overall satisfaction.
  - **o "Pulse Checks" in Synchronous Sessions:** If synchronous sessions are employed, tutors may allocate a brief period at the conclusion for rapid, informal feedback (e.g., quick polls, verbal check-ins).
  - **o Individual Consultation Opportunities:** In case instructors are available for one-on-one consultations, such a process will be helpful to address individual student concerns.
- **Regular Co-Instructor Synchronisation:**
  - **o Scheduled Meetings:** Beyond initial planning, it is useful to establish a routine schedule for synchronous meetings with co-instructors from partner institutions (e.g., weekly or bi-weekly). These sessions are vital for monitoring student progress, addressing emergent challenges, coordinating content delivery, and ensuring pedagogical alignment.
  - **o Shared Documentation:** Instructors are encouraged to maintain a shared, accessible log of meeting discussions, decisions, and assigned action points in order to be ensured that remain fully informed and aligned.
  - **o Meeting/Milestone Debriefs:** Following the completion of significant meetings or project milestones, instructors can organize a debriefing sessions to evaluate performance, identify areas for improvement, and address unforeseen issues.

To give a rundown of this strategy, feedback is considered important in order for educators to ensure that the COIL module evolves dynamically in accordance with participants' needs.
This proactive approach not only mitigates potential issues before they escalate but also cultivates trust and reinforces the collaborative ethos that is central to the COIL experience.

2.2. Groupwork Considerations – The Dynamics of Collaborative Synergy

The efficacy of groupwork constitutes a critical determinant of success in any collaborative learning environment. In a COIL context, where student groups are characterised by diverse geographical locations, temporal disparities, cultural norms, and academic backgrounds, the orchestration of effective group dynamics presents a heightened level of complexity. Nevertheless, it is within this crucible of collaborative engagement that many of the most profound COIL learning outcomes are forged. Beyond the thematic alignment of group projects with the broader curriculum, several considerations are important for COIL module developers in Integrated Planning to be taken into account.

2.2.1. Bridging Knowledge Gaps: Fostering Equitable Participation

When two or more academic institutions collaborate to offer a COIL module, it is crucial to bridge the **knowledge gaps** derived through the student groups that come from different institutions. For instance, students from one institution might exhibit proficiency in spatial analysis methodologies (e.g., space syntax), while their counterparts from a partner institution might possess advanced capabilities in computational urban analytics. Although such disparities are a natural consequence of distinct disciplinary specialisations and curricular emphases, failure to address these knowledge gaps proactively can lead to imbalances within groups, potentially resulting in frustration, inequitable workload distribution, and diminished collaborative synergy.

To avoid such problems, it is crucial to ensure that all students possess the requisite foundational knowledge to contribute effectively and equitably to the collective endeavour. A wider strategy, however, that helps in bridging the gaps is presented below:

• **Pre-Module Diagnostic Assessment:** Prior to the commencement of the course, a brief diagnostic assessment or survey may take place. Its goal is to ascertain students' prior knowledge, technical proficiencies (e.g., GIS software, statistical packages, urban design software), and comfort levels with key methodologies that re related

to Integrated Planning. This enables the identification of specific areas requiring supplementary support across the various groups.

• **Provision of Supplementary Workshops and Resources:** Based on the diagnostic assessment, targeted supplementary workshops may be designed and delivered. These should be offered as optional but highly recommended components, potentially with minor incentives for completion. Concerning their delivery, such workshops may be implemented through:

  o Synchronous Online Sessions: It is about live, interactive workshops focused on specific skills or conceptual frameworks (e.g., "Introduction to Geospatial Data Analysis," "Fundamentals of Urban Economic Modelling"). All synchronous sessions can be recorded and made available for asynchronous access.

  o Curated Asynchronous Tutorials: It is related to the development of high-quality video tutorials, interactive lectures, or comprehensive guides on specific concepts, software applications, or analytical techniques.

Both of these techniques may be referred to **"Bridging Lectures/Workshops"**.

• **Tailored Support Materials:** Beyond generic reading lists, specific academic readings, online resources, and practical exercises may provided to the students. In that way, they will address the knowledge gaps identified, in each case. It is crucial for this material to be mandatory for the students.

• **Facilitation of Peer-to-Peer Learning:** Students should be encouraged, where appropriate, to gain knowledge through formalised peer-mentoring opportunities within groups. In that way, students with stronger proficiencies in specific areas can support their peers.

• **Early Instructor Intervention:** Instructors should maintain vigilance for any signs of knowledge imbalance within the various groups. Prompt intervention, which might involve directing students to specific resources, suggesting a mini-workshop, or facilitating a targeted peer-mentoring session, is crucial for maintaining group cohesion and productivity.

By proactively addressing potential knowledge gaps, educators not only mitigate student frustration but also empower all participants to engage fully and meaningfully in the collaborative process. This ensures that the group's collective intellectual capacity is maximised, thereby fostering a more equitable and productive learning environment.

At this moment it should be underlined that all assignment instructions need to be clearly presented. Moreover, complex tasks should be systematically broken down into manageable, sequential steps. Provision of templates, exemplary outputs, and detailed rubrics can further guide student engagement.

2.2.2. Group Composition: The Strategic Formation of Heterogeneous Teams

The strategic formation of **group composition** is of a great importance in order for the coursework implemented during a COIL module to be a successful one. To achieve this goal it is crucial for the groups to be formulated in terms of balance. On the one hand, that means that groups should be of the same or similar enough number of students. On the other hand, it means that their synthesis must be based on students' academic backgrounds, their individual skillsets as well as their disciplinary specialisations. Effective collaboration, particularly within the inherently multidisciplinary domain of Integrated Planning, flourishes within **heterogeneous teams** where diverse disciplinary perspectives are actively leveraged as synergistic assets, rather than permitted to generate imbalance.

Such an approach is similar to assembling a

multi-disciplinary working group in order for a complex project to be conduct; in such a case, a blend of expertise – strategic, analytical, design-oriented, and communicative – is essential for holistic problem-solving.
Some principles that may be applied in order for group composition to be as optimal as possible, are the following:

• **Optimal Group Size:** The number of students participating in a working group should be ideal to promote effective collaboration. It could be said that a typical range from 4 to 6 students will be ideal. Groups that are too small may lack sufficient diversity or capacity for workload distribution, while excessively large groups can present significant coordination challenges and risk disengagement among members.

• **Instructor-Assigned Grouping:** : While students may express a preference for self-selection -however, it may not be as usual in COIL modules as in case of typical ones-, instructor-assigned groups are generally more effective in the initial stages of a COIL module. This ensures the desired heterogeneity (see below) and mitigates the formation of imbalanced teams. Subsequent projects (if any) may offer greater flexibility once students have experienced successful collaboration.

• **Transparency in Grouping Rationale:** Clearly communicate to students the pedagogical rationale underpinning group formation (e.g., "Groups are intentionally diversified by disciplinary background to foster interdisciplinary learning"). This transparency enhances student understanding and acceptance of the grouping strategy.

• **Institutional Parity:** It is important to eliminate the possibility of dominant discussions among students of one specific institution. To achieve this goal, an equitable or near-equitable distribution of students from each partner institution within every group is appropriate.

• **Strategic Interdisciplinary Mixing:** : Integrated Planning includes diverse disciplines such as urban design, architecture, civil engineering, environmental science, sociology, economics, public policy, geography, and data science. As a result, formation of groups should be made according to students' disciplinary strengths. For example, ensure each group comprises students with robust design capabilities, analytical/data proficiencies, and socio-economic/policy expertise.

• **Skillset and Proficiency Alignment:** Beyond formal academic backgrounds, it is important for tutors to consider students' practical and technical skills.

  o **Software Proficiency:** If the project necessitates specific software applications (e.g., ArcGIS, AutoCAD, R, Python), ensure that each group possesses at least one member with sufficient proficiency, or that adequate training and support mechanisms are in place for those requiring skill development.

  o **Communication Styles and Language Competence:** While English frequently serves as the lingua franca in COIL and, thus, it is considered that all participants are fluent in this language. However, it is usually acknowledged varying levels of English proficiency. As a result, -in case such an information is available- module organizers and/or tutors should consider pairing students (or distributing them into teams) where one possesses stronger English language skills to provide peer support, or ensure a mix of communication styles (e.g., more vocal versus more reflective individuals).

• **Leveraging Differences as Assets:** The objective is not to homogenise groups but to celebrate and strategically leverage the inherent differences.

  o **Complementary Strengths:** When students bring distinct expertise, they are positioned to engage in reciprocal teaching -this can easily

take place, in an informal way, within students' groups-, thereby enriching the learning experience for all and contributing to a more comprehensive final product.

o Diverse Perspectives: Varied academic traditions and cultural lenses within students' groups will naturally lead to divergent approaches to problem-solving, thereby stimulating critical thinking and fostering innovative solutions.

• **Optimal Group Size:** The number of students participating in a working group should be ideal to promote effective collaboration. It could be said that a typical range from 4 to 6 students will be ideal. Groups that are too small may lack sufficient diversity or capacity for workload distribution, while excessively large groups can present significant coordination challenges and risk disengagement among members.

Taking all the above into consideration, it is concluded that students' group formation is a quite important process as it may consist of a robust foundation for genuinely effective collaboration. A good group formation, according to the principles presented above, can transform disciplinary differences from potential obstacles into powerful assets, leading to more sophisticated solutions and a profoundly richer learning experience for every participant.

2.2.3. Flexibility in Group-Based Assignments: Nurturing Individual Contributions within a Collective Framework

Flexibility lets students focus on project parts related to their interests; such a perception allows students to apply and further develop their disciplinary expertise within the broader collaborative framework (role specialization). More specific, tutors can encourage students to formally **present their** proposed **individual contribution** to their group, articulating how their chosen focus will enhance the overall project. For instance, in an integrated planning context, a student with a strong background in urban design might take the lead on spatial visualisation and conceptual master planning, while another, with expertise in environmental policy, could focus on regulatory frameworks and sustainability impact assessments. A third, perhaps from a social science background, might specialise in community engagement strategies and equity analyses. This division of labour, underpinned by individual strengths, cultivates a sense of ownership and accountability, moving beyond superficial participation to genuine intellectual investment.

In order to encourage students to work in various fields and not only in those they are familiar with, tutors can also offer a **range of methodologies** through which students can contribute to a particular sub-component. For instance, for "Socio-economic Baseline Analysis," one student might focus on quantitative demographic data analysis, another on qualitative ethnographic research, and a third on historical socio-economic trends.

At this point, it should be mentioned that, while individual contributions are flexible, tutors must ensure the existence of clearly defined "integration points", where these disparate pieces must converge and be synthesised. Some integration points are the following:

o Mandatory Group Check-ins: Regular group meetings can be scheduled. At these meetings, members are going to provide updates on individual progress, discuss challenges, and ensure their work is harmonising with the collective endeavour.

o Collaborative Digital Platforms: Shared document editors (e.g., Google Workspace, Microsoft 365) and project management tools (e.g., Asana, Trello) can be promoted in order to facilitate real-time collaborative writing, editing, and task management.

2.3. Practical Considerations

Having established the pedagogical principles governing content architecture and group dynamics, it is of a great significance to pay attention to operational modalities – the practical considerations that underpin the seamless delivery of a COIL module. Even the most meticulously designed curriculum can falter without robust logistical planning and the careful selection of appropriate technological tools. Thus, this section addresses the pragmatic aspects that ensure the effective functioning of a COIL module in Integrated Planning.

2.3.1. Prioritising Asynchronous Learning: Optimising for Time Zones and Cognitive Depth

A foundational principle for the operational success of a COIL module is that **it should primarily be conducted online, with a deliberate minimisation of synchronous lectures in favour of asynchronous content, interactive forums, and collaborative digital platforms**. This is not merely a logistical convenience but a strategic pedagogical imperative dictated by the realities of international collaboration, particularly across disparate time zones.

Attempting to schedule mandatory synchronous sessions across significantly divergent time zones (e.g., between Europe, North America, and Asia) inevitably imposes undue burdens on some participants, potentially compromising their ability to engage effectively and assimilate complex information.

In order for asynchronous learning to be as effective as possible, strategies like the following are proposed to be applied:

- **Modularised Video Lectures:** It would be useful for students if traditional long-form lectures have been deconstructed into shorter, digestible video segments (e.g., 10-20 minutes each). These should be professionally produced and accompanied by supplementary materials such as interactive quizzes, embedded questions, or downloadable transcripts.
- **Structured Interactive Discussion Forums:** These constitute the backbone of asynchronous interaction. Tutors may (a) maintain a visible and active presence in discussion forums, providing constructive feedback, posing follow-up questions, and guiding the discourse to ensure aca-

demic rigour and relevance, (b) encourage students to respond to and build upon their peers' contributions, thereby fostering a vibrant learning community and collaborative knowledge construction and (c) formulate open-ended, analytical questions that stimulate debate and critical inquiry, directly linking to the course's unifying narrative and project milestones.

• **Robust Collaborative Digital Platforms:** These are indispensable for facilitating group project work, as it was mentioned above (see Section 2.3.3).

It should be underlined that in order for asynchronous learning to be fruitful, it is crucial for students to be provided with a rich and diverse array of academic articles, book chapters, professional reports, case studies, and multimedia resources (e.g., documentaries, podcasts). Instructors are also the ones who provide students with clear guidance on how students should engage with these materials (e.g., "focus on the theoretical implications discussed on pages 5-10," "critically evaluate the author's argument regarding X").

2.3.2. Structured Paired/Small Group Discussions: Deepening Interpersonal and Intercultural Learning

While asynchronous content forms the foundational layer of a COIL module, it is also important to encourage genuine intercultural exchange and facilitate profound interpersonal learning. This goes beyond typical collaboration on a project; it involves students truly comprehending and appreciating each other's perspectives, both academically and culturally. To achieve this, **structured time must be explicitly reserved for students to engage in paired or small group discussions**.

These are not casual chats but deliberate, pedagogically driven dialogues, strategically embedded within the lecture timeline and ideally linked to project milestones or weekly reflective tasks. To enhance such a collaboration, tutors may take into consideration some strategies like the ones follow:

• **Clear Prompts and Defined Objectives:** Each discussion must have a clear purpose and specific learning objectives. Some examples are given in the points follow. Notably, they are categorized in accordance with each strategic theme:

o Content Reflection: "Discuss how this week's urban planning theory might be applied or interpreted differently within your respective urban contexts, considering local regulatory frameworks and socio-cultural norms."

o Project-Related Problem-Solving: "Share a specific challenge encountered in your group project this week and collaboratively brainstorm potential solutions with your partner."

o Intercultural Exchange: "Discuss a typical day in the life of a university student in your country, highlighting any significant differences in academic culture or social engagement."

o Ethical Dilemmas: Instructors present a planning-related ethical dilemma and prompt students to discuss how it might be approached from their distinct cultural or legal perspectives.

• **Strategic Pairing/Small Group Formation: Discussions may take place either in pairs (proposed) or in small groups. Students should be enrolled** in different partner institutions to maximise intercultural interaction. It should be noticed that pairings might not be static but students should be exposed to a wider array of classmates and diverse perspectives. Concerning the rational on pairing, for certain discussions, it may be beneficial to pair students with similar disciplinary backgrounds to facilitate comparative analysis of approaches, while for others, pairing students with highly divergent backgrounds can stimulate novel insights.

• **Explicit Time Allocation:** The duration of such discussions should be kept short. Ideally speaking, 10-15 minutes seems to be an ideal interval.
• **Utilisation of Appropriate Platforms:** Employ video conferencing tools (e.g., Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams) for synchronous discussions. For asynchronous discussions, dedicated online forums (see Section 2.3.2) or shared collaborative document spaces are highly effective. Generally speaking, discussions through synchronous learning seems to be more effective and they should be enhanced.
• **Synthesis and Reporting Mechanisms:** It would be useful for students to make a presentation of what they discussed in pairs to the whole class (plenary sharing). This allows students to exchange ideas. Alternatively, students can submit short summaries of their discussions, highlighting key insights, points of convergence, or unresolved questions.

2.3.3. The International Week Revisited: The Power of Place and Presence in Experiential Learning

The concept of the "International Week (see Section 2.1.4) warrants further elaboration within the operational modalities, given its intricate logistical and pedagogical implications. As an activity, it serves as the tangible manifestation of the international collaboration, a pivotal moment where the virtual realm converges with lived reality. Crucially, during this physical convergence, **a single, site-specific case study about the host city should be employed as the primary learning object**. It is important for one case study to be selected; attempting to encompass too many disparate sites or topics will inevitably dilute the learning experience and overwhelm participants. Below, some operational and logistical imperatives related to the "International Week" are mentioned:

• **Advance Planning and Inter-Institutional Coordination:**
  o Logistics: Meticulous planning is essential for travel (flights, local transport), accommodation, and meal arrangements. Dedicated logistical coordinators at both partner institutions are indispensable.
  o Financial Management: Funding should be secured in advance. It may involve institutional grants, student contributions, or external sponsorships. Absolute transparency regarding costs and potential financial support must be maintained with students.
  o Visa and Immigration Compliance: Visa requirements for all participating students and faculty from all the institutions participate should be reviewed. The application process should be initiated on time.
  o Insurance Coverage: Comprehensive travel and health insurance must be ensured for all participants.
  o Emergency Protocols: Clear emergency contact information and robust protocols for medical emergencies, security incidents, or other unforeseen circumstances must be established.
• **Development of the Case Study:**
  o Selection Criteria: The selection of the case study should be made taken into account criteria like the richness of issues and their complexity, the availability of data and the relevance to the module's narrative. It should offer ample opportunities for multi-faceted analysis (e.g., socio-economic, environmental, political, cultural).
  o Local Stakeholder Engagement: Strong collaborative relationships with local planning departments, community organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and academic experts should be cultivated. Their contextual insights are invaluable and thus it is crucial to urge them enhance students effort. For that reason, small cities as well as residential networks are proposed as ideal

cases for study during the COIL module.

o Pre-Visit Briefing Materials: Provide students with comprehensive background information on the case study area prior to their arrival: historical context, demographic data, relevant policy frameworks, and profiles of key stakeholders.

- **Structuring On-Site Visits:**

o Purposeful Itinerary: Every site visit must possess clear learning objectives. The emphasis should be on active engagement with the environment rather than passive sightseeing.

o Guided Observation and Data Collection: Students should be furnished with structured observation checklists or specific questions to guide their engagement during site visits. They should be encouraged to collect qualitative data through observation, photographic documentation, and, where ethically appropriate, to interact with local residents or business owners.

o Diverse Perspectives: The visits should be designed to allow students to engage with various objectives of the case study – e.g., formal planning offices, community-led initiatives, new urban developments, heritage sites.

- **Maximising Expert Engagement:** As it was already mentioned in this section, community engagement is crucial. Quite important is also to urge local experts to participate in the COIL module process. Some strategies that can be implemented include:

o Workshops and Presentations: Sessions can be scheduled in order for local urban planners, architects, environmental specialists, social workers, and policymakers to express their points of view about the case study. Empirical implications as well as theoretical topics can be presented.

o Interactive Q&A and Dialogue: An open and critical dialogue can be facilitated to foster student engagement in substantive discussions.

o Real-World Critiques: Local experts can provide constructive feedback on the students' interim group project progress, offering authentic professional perspectives.

- **Dedicated Collaborative Work Time:** During the “International Week”, the majority of the daily schedule may be dedicated to collaborative work. To enhance that, it is important for students to be provided with conducive physical spaces where international groups can work together intensively. Moreover, it is important to ensure that instructors are physically present and available to guide groups, mediate conflicts, and provide immediate pedagogical support to the students.
- **Cultural Immersion and Social Activities:**

o Beyond Academic Focus: While academic objectives are important, module organizers should also include the social and cultural dimensions. Curated informal activities (e.g., a welcome reception, a cultural excursion, a farewell event) need to be organized to foster socializing and deepen intercultural understanding.

o Local Student Integration: Instructors should urge local students (even those not directly enrolled in the COIL module) to act as cultural ambassadors, facilitating informal interactions and sharing local insights.

Through those strategies, “International Week” may offer immersive and experiential learning that deepens understanding, strengthens relationships, and enriches the COIL experience, bridging theory and practice in a memorable transformative way.

At this point it should be clarified that an activity like this one (International Week) is not requirement for a COIL to be implemented. However, its implementation is strongly encouraged in order for its success to be ensured.

3 Final Thoughts: The Transformative Potential of Pedagogical Intent

This comprehensive framework has sought to delineate the critical dimensions for designing and implementing a COIL module in Integrated Planning that transcends conventional educational paradigms. The overarching principle, consistently articulated, is that of **pedagogical intentionality**. This is not merely an administrative exercise but a profound commitment to cultivating a truly transformative learning experience.

The core tenets articulated herein are predicated upon a rigorous commitment to:

• **Narrative Cohesion:** Ensuring that every constituent element of the curriculum is seamlessly integrated into a unifying thematic framework. This intellectual scaffolding provides clarity of purpose, facilitates cognitive integration, and transforms a potentially fragmented learning experience into a coherent, purposeful intellectual journey.
• **Practical Application:** Grounding theoretical constructs in authentic, real-world challenges. By embedding weekly learning within a meticulously structured, project-based trajectory, students are empowered to actively apply their knowledge, incrementally develop critical skills, and discern the tangible impact of their work. This ensures that learning is not merely academic but profoundly relevant and actionable within professional practice.
• **Pedagogical Inclusivity:** Acknowledging, valuing, and strategically leveraging the inherent diversity of students – encompassing varied academic backgrounds, cultural perspectives, and learning styles. Proactive strategies that bridge knowledge gaps, ensure the judicious formation of heterogeneous groups, and provide flexible assignment structures are necessary. To achieve that goal, a responsive online environment that accommodates temporal disparities and fosters an open, respectful dialogue where all voices are not only heard but actively valued, should be cultivated.

In addition to the strategies mentioned above, by incorporating reflective practices, meaningful face-to-face encounters, and adaptive feedback mechanisms, the course fosters an environment that is both rigorous and responsive.

This ensures that students develop both technical and soft skills, such as intercultural communication, teamwork, and systems thinking, that are essential for addressing today's multifaceted urban challenges.

In doing so, the course exemplifies the pedagogical potential of international collaboration in higher education, offering a model for how global learning can be academically robust and socially relevant.

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