Cross-Cultural Virtual Exchange: Innovative Learning for Social Change

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Virtual Exchange
Education Technology Designed for Global Collaboration

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Unique Pedagogy + The Platform

- Video & audio live sessions supporting up to 30
- Online breakout rooms
- Whiteboard, chat box, quizzes, & polls
- Session recording & playback
- Performance review & tracking
- Asynchronous communication outside of session time
- Screen sharing and interactive whiteboard
- Secure environment following IT industry security standards
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Technology is not a neutral learning tool
Train & apply cross-cultural facilitators
Use conflict resolution tools
Advance socio-emotional learning
Since 2003, Soliya — a New York based nonprofit organization — has integrated virtual exchange programming into curricula at over 150 universities in 30 countries across North America, Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia.

Over the course of a semester, students engage online in face-to-face small group dialogue and collaborate with peers across the globe, under the guidance of Soliya-trained facilitators. The experience offers young people — often for the very first time — the opportunity to: voice their opinions on a global scale, critically explore pressing and divisive issues, and be exposed to vastly different perspectives in a safe environment.
For over a decade Soliya has been working with education specialists and technologists to fill an important gap in communication — technology that supports human connection. Research shows that, when paired with new pedagogies, platforms that support synchronous communication can build human relations as effectively as in person mediums.

**WHY SOLIYA?**

- **CONTACT**
  Face-to-face, cross-cultural contact in small groups, in real-time.

- **EXCHANGE**
  Apply new understanding of diverse cultures, beliefs, economies, technology, and forms of society to deepen local and global knowledge.

- **GROW**
  Acquire 21st century skills and attitudes to effectively collaborate and communicate with people in cross-cultural settings and ability to reflect on issues from diverse perspectives.

What Soliya provides is important and unique at both the individual and global levels. More and more diverse young people should be provided with access to virtual exchange opportunities.

- Queen Noor Hussein of Jordan
Students are recruited through Soliya’s global partners, with vastly diverse backgrounds, views, levels of understanding, and skill sets.

They gather weekly with trained facilitators to gain cross-cultural skills and attitudes and explore their differences in a safe environment.

They leave with increased self-other awareness, improved 21st century skills, and permanent access to Soliya’s richly diverse alumni and professional network.

“It is fine to talk about theories about “engaging the other” or “increasing understanding across cultures”, but Soliya puts the students on the front lines of intercultural relations. They will learn more about themselves and their place in the world in the Soliya sessions than in a semester in International Relations classes.”

— Ambassador Cynthia Schneider, Georgetown University, USA

“ Their eyes were opened to a reality with which they had previously had no contact, except through the media. They discovered through direct contact with young people of their age the events and emotions associated with the realities of the Arab world. In short, Soliya is my students’ window on the Arab world and is simply indispensable in that context.”

— Dr. Robert Crane, École Nationale des Ponts et Chaussées, France
**OVERALL GOALS OF THE CONNECT PROGRAM**

**Cross Cultural Communication and Collaboration Skills**
- Develop participants’ cross-cultural communication skills and ability to engage in constructive dialogue across difference
- Enable participants to recognize the necessity of engaging constructively with alternative perspectives to craft sustainable solutions to shared problems
- Develop the ability to represent ones points of view and provide space for hearing the points of view of multiple and diverse parties in a productive discussion process;

**Empathy: Relationship Building, Appreciating & Respecting Others**
- Encourage participants to approach dialogue and differences with a genuine curiosity and an intention for understanding
- Allow participants to acknowledge each other’s emotions and humanity, by connecting with others’ experiences and feelings
- Enhance participants’ ability to appreciate and respect, even if not agreeing with, diverse perspectives, and recognizing these diverse views are a result of a thought process that is highly affected by social norms, biases, emotions and experiences, just as one’s own views
- Provide participants with the opportunity and encourage them to develop positive relationships with one another, relationships of mutual respect and understanding

**Critical Thinking:**
- Develop the ability to think more critically and complexly about issues relevant to relations between “Western societies” and “predominantly Muslim societies”.
- Encourage all participants to have the opportunity to genuinely re-examine and analyze pre-existing opinions and beliefs in a space in which transformation and reconsideration of existing views is possible

**Critical Awareness:**
- Allow participants to gain understanding of the perspective/narrative of others in the group— not only the positions taken or the opinions expressed, but specifically the underlying emotions, assumptions, values, biases, social norms and experiences that shape these positions
- Help participants develop a clearer understanding of their own perspective, and develop an awareness of the emotions, assumptions, values, biases, social norms as well as one’s personal relationship with the issues
- Allow participants to explore how their identity impacts the way they view and approach the world, and how they communicate with those with different perspectives

**Activation:**
- Develop a long-term interest in cross-cultural communication and engagement with the relationship between “Western societies” and “predominantly Muslim societies”
- By the end of the Program, participants have the ideas, skills, tools, and opportunities to make a positive contribution to relations between “Western societies” and “predominantly Muslim societies”
- Participants feel responsible to make this kind of positive contribution
WORKING WITH GROUP PROCESS IN THE CONNECT PROGRAM

Connect Program tries to achieve the above goals by guiding the groups through a group process. Here are the model stages and simple steps facilitators can take in assisting the group process:

Stage 1. Orientation
- There is little trust amongst the group members.
- Anxiety is very high as everything is new. This is balanced by curiosity about the new experience, new people and new format of interacting.
- Members get to know each other. They begin to identify the individual characteristics of their group members, and they form some early hypothesis about their peers.

**Facilitator role: Balance between guiding them and providing space for the group to define the angle that interests them most.

Stage 2. Group Definition – Polite moderation
- Trust begins to develop and bonds between group members are formed.
- People begin to see themselves as part of a group; similarities between group members and common interests are emphasized and explored.
- People worry about how they will get their own opinion or positions heard but they don’t want to create conflict. Need to appear as friends and non-controversial may result in excessive politeness. Participants carefully choose their words, and seek to 1) avoid highlighting differences, 2) appease each other or 3) cover with humor any difference or tension between them.
- Roles in group become defined. Different levels of motivation become apparent.

**Facilitator Role: Continue fostering group bonds through relationship building exercises; simultaneously push students to think critically, one way to do this is to encourage self-reflection, considering the roots of their own perceptions (link to identity activity, values activity), before digging into their peers perceptions.

Stage 3. Learning through Difference
- Trust – In the process of working together, participants build trust, learn to share more about themselves and their thinking, and therefore develop cohesion.
- Group builds skills necessary to have discussions on serious, controversial and emotionally laden topics.
- Group starts to name the differences between them, and to cautiously address the issues that divide them. This stage is often characterized by increasing emotion and a difficulty to empathize with some perspectives. Group members find that others are not listening and some people may still be less than completely open and honest. The conversation often goes in circles.
- Different power dynamics become more apparent.
- Frustration towards the group might appear if the group is unable to move from being politically correct to fully expressing themselves and their opinions, and to actively listening to each other.

**Facilitator Role: Once differences in views and positions begin to arise, skilled facilitation is crucial. Observe dynamics and model how to take the discussion deeper, by looking at assumptions and personal experiences.

**Facilitator Role: Create a safe space balanced with a level of discomfort where students are challenged. This is key to a good discussion and can be essential for students’ learning.
Stage 4. Sincere transformation
- Trust is high.
- Participants realize that their normal communication patterns are not very helpful. They start trying to listen to and learn from one another. Their focus shifts from trying to force their opinions upon the rest of the group to trying to understand others’ perspectives. They also begin to explain their own point of view in a way that individuals from the “other side” can hear. That is when the “transformation” of the relationships, based on mutual understanding and empathy, can happen.
- Group realizes that real learning arises from expressing themselves openly, examining their own thinking process as well as that of others, and engaging with the different views in the group.
- The group members manage disruptive conflict, especially if they have become self-aware of the group process and have internalized the idea of good discussion.

**Facilitator Role:** Continue to encourage participants to reflect on discussions and what they are taking away from them.

Stage 5. Forward-looking Brainstorming
- Focus on having good discussions as a group is shifted to brainstorming how this experience, and things learnt as a group, could be utilized and transferred outside the group context.
- Group usually starts to feel that they want to share what they have learned with the larger community. This is when they can start to think jointly about how they can contribute outside of the group and change things for the better.
- Group discussions become future- and solutions-oriented, and there is a shift from dialogue to action.

**Facilitator Role:** Inspire forward thinking each discussion. Don’t enable participants to sit with what is but to think collaboratively about what can be done.

Stage 6. Winding Down
- This is the stage when group says goodbye and expresses their gratitude towards the group for creating the experience & learning.
- Group decides whether they will work together as a group in the future.
- If friendships have been formed, plans are made as to how they will remain in contact and active as a group.

**Facilitator Role:** Invite students to stay involved by suggesting one of these activities.

Note that not all groups go through the semester following this model exactly, but there are great variations in the process. Groups also go through this process with varying speeds some finding it easier to progress than other groups. Finally, groups don’t always progress in a linear manner through these stages: you’ll find some groups reaching stage 3 with confidence in exploring controversial issue and then go back to stage 2 when addressing a different topic for instance. Those are just very useful landmarks to understand where your group is at.