Virtual Exchange Impact and Learning Report

STEVENS INITIATIVE | 2019

Stevens Initiative

INSPIRATION

The Stevens Initiative is a lasting tribute to Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens, a public servant who dedicated himself to building understanding between people from different countries. Always gracious, fascinated by other cultures, and constantly asking questions, Ambassador Stevens engaged in open and respectful dialogue with everyone he met. His appreciation for the differences that make people unique was fueled by his early experiences abroad, when he studied as a high school student in Spain and as a college student in Italy.

Ambassador Stevens devoted his life to building bridges. As a young man, he volunteered to join the Peace Corps and taught English in the Atlas Mountains of Morocco. Morocco was his gateway to a life spent as a brave and intrepid diplomat for the United States. He served most of his career in North Africa and the Middle East, a region he grew to love, and rose to become the U.S. Ambassador to Libya. In September 2012, he was killed by violent extremists in Libya as he continued this important work.

The Stevens Initiative, conceived and developed in close partnership with Ambassador Stevens' family, was inspired by the meaningful international exchange experiences that Ambassador Stevens had as a young man — experiences that helped shape the kind of diplomat he would become.

The Stevens Initiative is sponsored by the U.S. Department of State, with funding provided by the U.S. Government, and is administered by the Aspen Institute. It is also supported by the Bezos Family Foundation and the governments of Morocco and the United Arab Emirates.

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Acknowledgments

This report, and the work that it represents, would not have been possible without the partnership of the U.S. Department of State, the Aspen Institute, the Bezos Family Foundation, and the governments of Morocco and the United Arab Emirates. We are grateful for the contributions and tireless hours of our grantees and their partners, who represent hundreds of educators and facilitators, and for the thousands of young people participating in virtual exchange. We would like to express our appreciation to RTI International for conducting the excellent research and analysis that is reflected in this report and to the Jake Group for its design expertise. Finally, we would like to acknowledge, with much appreciation, the crucial role of the Stevens Initiative team members for their efforts to produce this report.

The Aspen Institute

The Aspen Institute is an educational and policy studies organization based in Washington, DC. Its mission is to foster leadership based on enduring values and to provide a nonpartisan venue for dealing with critical issues. The Institute is based in Washington, DC; Aspen, Colorado; and on the Wye River on Maryland's Eastern Shore. It also has offices in New York City and an international network of partners. For more information, visit www.aspeninstitute.org.

INTRODUCTION LETTER

Dear Colleagues:

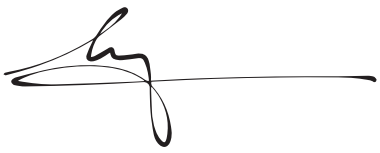
The Stevens Initiative is pleased to share this "Virtual Exchange Impact and Learning Report." It begins by offering some brief reflections on how far the virtual exchange field has come, the potential for achieving far broader reach by working together, and some of the steps the Initiative plans to take to help the field reach our shared goals. The virtual exchange field has come a long way: We are seeing a marked increase in the use of virtual exchange in a variety of academic disciplines, from entrepreneurship to STEM to in-depth discussions on world affairs, all with the underlying premise that dialogue, connection, and collaboration among students of different backgrounds yield an enriching learning experience. Yet we also know that — in order to stand out in a crowded education and technology landscape — virtual exchange practitioners, educators, policymakers, funders, and other stakeholders need to emphasize the value proposition of virtual exchange and to coordinate their efforts.

This report also shares evaluation data and observations about promising practices from those programs that the Stevens Initiative supported with grants during the calendar year 2018. We hope these data and observations not only indicate the significant impact that virtual exchange can have on young people, but also show that there remain several aspects of virtual exchange — an emerging and evolving field — that need more exploration and improvement in order to have greater effect.

This will be the first of many reports that will shed light on the state of the virtual exchange field, the work and impact of the Initiative, and the opportunity to achieve much more in the years ahead. The Stevens Initiative team is excited for the next phase of our work, and we hope you'll join us as a champion for virtual exchange practice in all classrooms, giving every student an international experience that will prepare them for life in the 21st century.

Should you have any further questions or comments, please feel free to reach out at **stevensinitiative@aspeninstitute.org**. We want to hear from you to better understand how we can serve and support you.

Sincerely,



Mohamed Abdel-Kader
Executive Director
The Stevens Initiative

The Virtual Exchange Landscape

The Stevens Initiative aims to give every young person the knowledge, skills, and experiences they need to prosper in an increasingly interconnected world. To achieve this goal, the Initiative is working to build the field of virtual exchange, an emerging approach that uses technology to connect young people around the world to learn and work together. Virtual exchange is a promising but underutilized method that should be used in every school, university, and community organization.

Most virtual exchange programs share some common characteristics: using videoconference for synchronous or real-time communication, sending written or recorded messages asynchronously, or some combination of both methods; connecting young people in different countries; facilitating the learning experience with trained educators; and maintaining sustained communication over weeks or months so participants can build trust and understanding. Many programs involve projects that require participant collaboration through small online groups, other programs emphasize cross-cultural dialogue, and several programs combine both projects and dialogue. Practitioners use several different terms to describe their programs — "global digital exchange," "collaborative online international learning," and "telecollaboration," among others — while many other educators connect their students with classrooms around the world without employing any of these terms or being connected to any of these communities of practice.

Virtual exchange is not as recent a development as many would assume. Educators and others have sought to use information technology to link young people in classrooms around the world since at least the late 1980s, when iEARN started a program connecting high school students in the United States and the Soviet Union in an attempt to bridge the divide of the Cold War. Since that first effort and aided by the advent of high-speed internet, social media, and online social networks, subsequent generations of programs and organizations have worked independently and collectively to bring the concept and practice of virtual exchange to where it is today: an exciting and innovative field that has multiple stakeholders across governments, businesses, and civil society.

> **In our increasingly globalized world, the next generation of leaders must be able to work together across borders and through differences to solve complex problems; virtual exchange has the potential to help young people gain the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to do so.**

Amid this upswing in activity, the virtual exchange field is in a thrilling but precarious position. In our increasingly globalized world, the next generation of leaders must be able to work together across borders and through differences to solve complex problems; virtual exchange has the potential to help young people gain the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to do so. It can also reach many young people who would otherwise lack the opportunity to participate in an in-person exchange program.

Despite its potential, virtual exchange is conducted in only a small fraction of the educational institutions and communities where it could have a positive effect. The field needs to mature in several significant areas in order to realize its potential. The Stevens Initiative contributes to many efforts aimed at achieving a mature virtual exchange field:

REACHING A SHARED VISION AND PURPOSE

Those in the field should work together to find common ground about what virtual exchange is and what effect it has, so that they can project a common public identity and make the case that virtual exchange programs can meet central educational as well as broader societal goals.

RAISING DEMAND

Virtual exchange champions must raise awareness of and demand for the field, which can then lead to the funding and innovation that will elevate virtual exchange to a new level of prominence. To stand out as a promising practice that is ripe for expansion, virtual exchange needs to cut through the noise of a crowded education technology and global education landscape.

BUILDING A HEALTHY SUPPLY OF PROGRAMS

Whether at the primary, secondary, or higher education level, practitioners need more resources to run and expand their programs, including standards of practice based on evidence, training opportunities, and more readily accessible funds. With these resources, more providers of high-quality, affordable programs can join the field to meet demand.

CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT THAT ENABLES BROAD ADOPTION

Four elements would make it easier for virtual exchange to become widely practiced:

- A strong evidence base that demonstrates the impact of virtual exchange
- A diverse set of funders and other sources of sustainable revenue, particularly to bring virtual exchange to communities that have the greatest need for international learning opportunities
- A strong community of practice, with a calendar of events, virtual spaces, publications, and other widely recognized ways for practitioners to share information and learn from one another
- Supportive policy at the local, national, and international levels in which policymakers specifically prioritize virtual exchange in their education and development agendas

The Stevens Initiative is committed to helping build a mature field through three strategic pillars of work.

PILLAR 1

GRANTS

The Initiative makes grants to nonprofit organizations and educational institutions to implement virtual exchange programs. Grants, also referred to as "awards," are intended to seed innovative new programs and scale up proven programs. The Initiative has made grants to 22 organizations through three past competitions, reaching nearly 40,000 young people in 15 MENA (Middle East and North Africa) countries; the Palestinian Territories; 45 U.S. states; Puerto Rico; and Washington, DC. The most recently announced award recipients are Global Nomads Group, IREX, Soliya, the William Davidson Institute at the University of Michigan, and World Learning. The Initiative will continue to administer grant competitions, make awards, and facilitate connections as part of a broader effort to encourage more educators and institutions to get involved in virtual exchange. The Initiative will make awards to organizations based in Morocco and the United Arab Emirates with the support of those governments. Visit the **Projects** page of the Initiative's website to learn more about awardee programs.

PILLAR 2

KNOWLEDGE HUB

The Initiative seeks to serve as a central place for collecting and sharing promising practices and other resources for the virtual exchange field. The Initiative shares evaluation data and other information from its grantee programs through webinars, case studies, conference presentations, and other avenues; it also intends to work with other practitioners over the next several months to lay out a research agenda to advance knowledge in the field. In the process of establishing a research agenda, the Initiative will create an annotated bibliography and other resources to establish common terms for describing program characteristics and set a baseline for tracking the growth of the field in the years ahead.

PILLAR 3

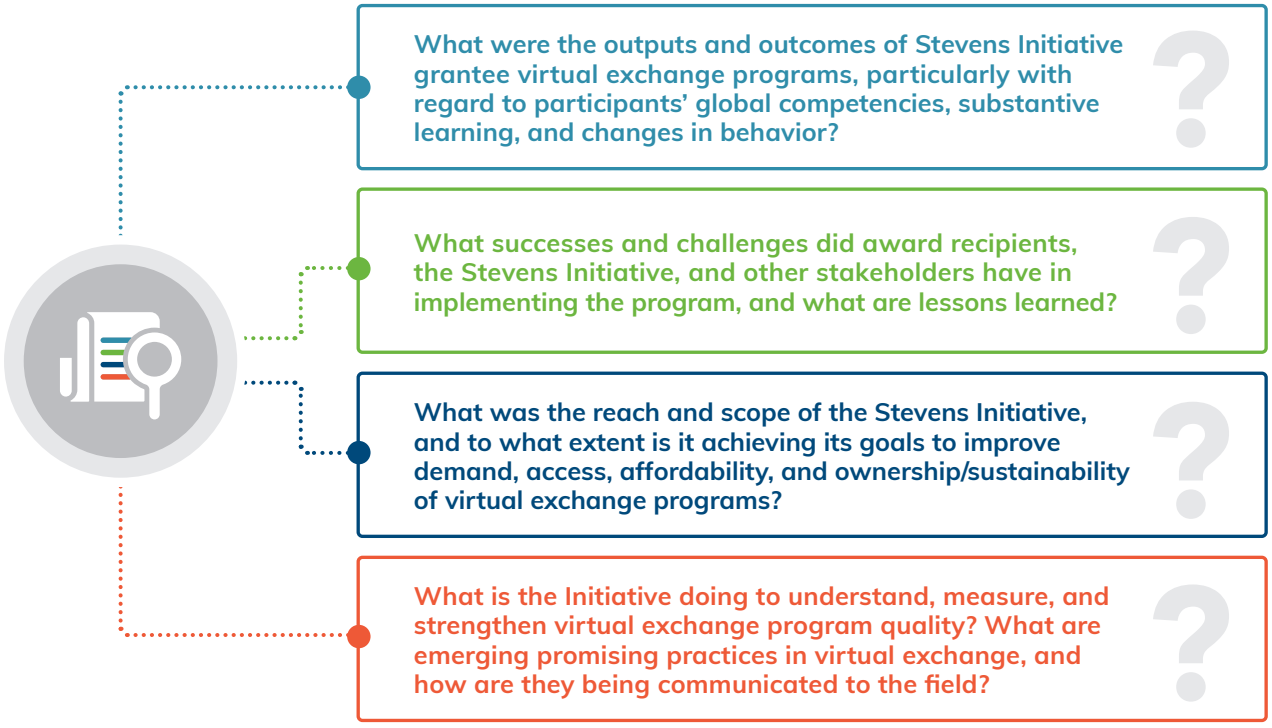
ADVOCACY

By building new partnerships and mobilizing new resources, the Initiative seeks to raise awareness of and demand for virtual exchange. Acting as a public champion of the field, the Initiative has presented at dozens of conferences in the U.S. and around the world, including at NAFSA, SXSW EDU, AIEA, ASCD, and the Aspen Ideas Festival. On social media, the Initiative shares stories of the impact of its grantees' programs. In addition to continuing to present at international education and education technology conferences, the Initiative will begin hosting information sessions and workshops on getting started in virtual exchange, both in the U.S. and in the MENA region. The Initiative is pursuing partnerships with education institutions, nongovernmental organizations, philanthropies, and private-sector organizations to expand virtual exchange in places where there is a high need for more international learning opportunities.

Through these pillars of work, the Initiative will continue to demonstrate that virtual exchange is impactful and able to reach young people through a diverse set of programs across the U.S., the Middle East, and North Africa. The Initiative will help practitioners better understand the effect of programs and improve their methods. The Initiative also will mobilize leaders across several fields to call for and support the growth of virtual exchange. These efforts will foster an environment ripe for compounding growth, innovation, and adoption in the years ahead.

2018 Evaluation

The Stevens Initiative has worked with RTI International on an independent evaluation of grantee programs and the Initiative's broader field-building efforts since 2016. The evaluation is intended to collect information related to these questions:



RTI has taken a developmental evaluation approach that allows for real-time feedback, supports ongoing adaption and improvement, and gives researchers the flexibility to respond to the real-time needs of program stakeholders. Because the Initiative is still relatively young and some grantees are new to the field of virtual exchange, one of the evaluation's highest priorities is to support learning and continuous improvement for both the grantees and the Stevens Initiative. To that end, RTI provides extensive technical assistance to grantees and convenes a quarterly Evaluation Working Group so grantee and Initiative partner staff can discuss evaluation methods.

The Initiative and RTI worked with grantees to identify common intended outcomes in the virtual exchange field. RTI developed a survey that can be administered to participants before and after the virtual exchange program to assess changes in the participants' global competencies. RTI reviews survey results from grantee programs after each round or term of virtual exchange. RTI also uses qualitative methods to learn about the effectiveness of virtual exchange programs, principally by conducting site visits across the U.S. and the MENA region to observe grantee activities; implementing focus groups with participants; and interviewing educators, facilitators, and administrators. RTI shares observations and recommendations from site visits as well as from comprehensive semiannual reports, including quantitative and qualitative data, with grantees and with the Initiative. The Initiative recently shared promising practices for evaluating

virtual exchange programs as well as recommended survey items related to global competency, both developed by RTI. RTI also conducts interviews with key stakeholders and reviews records to help the Initiative analyze progress toward its broader field-building goals beyond the outcomes from grantee programs. The Initiative will share findings from the next iteration of this field-building analysis in an upcoming report.

Participant Demographics

During calendar year 2018, 7,903 young people participated in programs supported by the Stevens Initiative: 4,304 participants in 31 U.S. states and 3,599 participants in 12 countries across the MENA region and the Palestinian Territories. In both the U.S. and MENA region, the Stevens Initiative reached middle school, high school, and postsecondary youth.

The Initiative aims to increase access to international exchanges for students who might not otherwise have such opportunities. Some important characteristics, such as income level, are difficult to ascertain because younger students may not be able to reliably report this information, and it is a sensitive question to ask of any participant. RTI therefore collected data about the following characteristics that might suggest students at those institutions may have had fewer opportunities for cultural exchanges compared with students at other institutions:

Percentage of 2018 participants who attended public institutions	U.S. Secondary School Level	82%
	MENA Region Secondary School Level	64%
	U.S. Postsecondary Level	87%
	MENA Region Postsecondary Level	67%
Percentage of 2018 MENA region participants who attended institutions where the primary language of instruction was not English	Secondary School Level	79%
	Postsecondary Level	56%
Percentage of 2018 U.S. participants	At the Secondary School Level Who Attended Title 1 Schools	32%
	At the Post-Secondary Level Who Attended Community Colleges	15%

Survey Results

Stevens Initiative grantees used pre- and post-program surveys to measure changes in participants' global competencies. The latest version of these common survey items is available on the **resources** page of the Initiative's website. Survey questions focused on the following global competency domains:

- Knowledge of the Other Country or Culture
- Knowledge Seeking (about the other country or culture)
- Perspective Taking 1 (positive attitudes) and 2 (negative attitudes)
- Empathy
- Cross-Cultural Communication
- Cross-Cultural Collaboration 1 (positive attitudes) and 2 (negative attitudes)

SPRING 2018: EFFECT SIZES AND TOTAL NUMBERS (n), BY REGION

	MENA	U.S.	All	n MENA	n U.S.	n Total
Knowledge of Other	**0.57**	**1.49**	**0.89**	162	98	260
Knowledge of Other (retrospective)	**0.63**	**1.05**	**0.81**	127	89	216
Knowledge Seeking	0.09	**0.23**	*0.15	65	68	133
Perspective Taking 1	0.02	0.09	0.04	287	193	480
Perspective Taking 2 (negative)	-0.04	*-0.16	-0.09	271	193	464
Cross-Cultural Communication	**0.24**	0.15	0.19	42	48	90
Cross-Cultural Communication (retrospective)	**0.42**	**0.23**	**0.32**	44	49	93
Cross-Cultural Collaboration 1	0.04	0.03	0.03	252	155	407
Cross-Cultural Collaboration 2 (negative)	-0.05	-0.14	-0.08	256	156	412

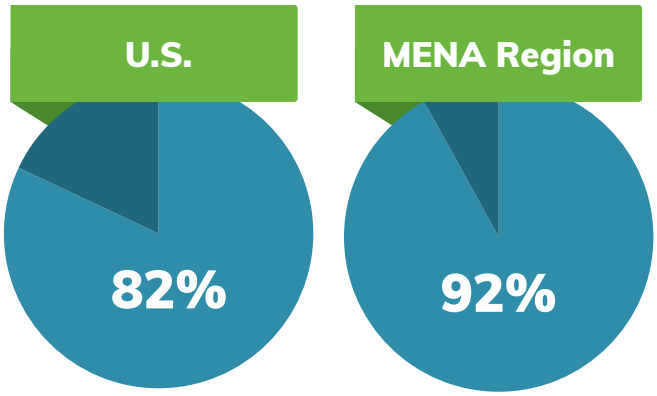
FALL 2018: EFFECT SIZES AND TOTAL NUMBERS (n), BY REGION

	MENA	U.S.	All	n MENA	n U.S.	n Total
Knowledge of Other	**0.34**	**1.57**	**0.75**	318	204	522
Knowledge of Other (retrospective)	**0.39**	**1.26**	**0.69**	287	171	458
Knowledge Seeking	0.13	0.05	*0.06	184	356	540
Perspective Taking 1	0.01	0.04	0.03	506	565	1071
Perspective Taking 2 (negative)	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	505	561	1066
Empathy/Warm Feelings	0.05	**0.37**	*0.19	104	87	191
Cross-Cultural Communication	0.10	0.03	0.08	239	146	385
Cross-Cultural Communication (retrospective)	**0.29**	**0.31**	**0.30**	239	147	386
Cross-Cultural Collaboration 1	0.12	*0.13	*0.12	348	440	788
Cross-Cultural Collaboration 2 (negative)	-0.03	0.02	-0.01	351	444	795

Note: These tables summarize spring 2018 and fall 2018 results overall and by region on each of the global competency survey scales. Specifically, the tables show effect size, which is a measure of the magnitude of a change in average survey responses from the pre-survey to the post-survey. Effect sizes of at least 0.2 (20% of a standard deviation), a reasonable threshold for reporting small effects, are highlighted with bold text. A positive effect size indicates an increase in the specific domain of global competency listed, whereas a negative effect size indicates a decrease in the specific domain of global competency listed. Effect sizes that are smaller than 0.20 but are nevertheless statistically significant are marked with an asterisk (*).

Most programs also asked participants if they would recommend the program to others.

Percentage of 2018 participants who agreed or strongly agreed that they would recommend the program to others



Notable Outcomes

Knowledge of the Other Country or Culture: During the spring and fall 2018 terms, there was a large positive change in participants' knowledge of the other country or culture from pre-program to post-program across both the MENA region and the U.S. This change was confirmed when spring 2018 participants were asked post-program to retrospectively assess their knowledge of the other country or culture before their program ("Think back to before you started [program name] …"). These quantitative findings were supplemented by qualitative data obtained via participant and facilitator interviews and focus groups conducted during in-person and virtual site visits in fall 2018.

> **I made a connection with my international partners. I learned about them and their city and their university life. My Michigan teammates taught me a lot about [the] U.S., and we went from a professional relationship to a more personal-friend level.**
>
> — MOROCCAN PARTICIPANT

Knowledge Seeking: During the spring 2018 evaluation, there was a small positive change in U.S. participants' interest in learning more about unfamiliar places, languages, and cultures.

> **I attribute a lot of my interest in the Middle East and North African culture to the weekly exchanges I was able to have with those students in Morocco… and we became friends. I understood that they are a world away, but they are still just your neighbors.**
>
> — U.S. PARTICIPANT

Cross-Cultural Communication: The fall and spring 2018 terms saw a positive change in participants' retrospective assessment of their cross-cultural communication skills. These findings were corroborated by qualitative data from interviews and focus groups conducted during in-person and virtual site visits in fall 2018.

> **This virtual exchange experience showed me that there are similarities between me and other young people around the world. I realized that although we communicate differently, although we may speak different languages — this class made me want to build more connections.**
>
> — U.S. PARTICIPANT

Secondary Outcomes: The qualitative data from RTI's site visits also point to participant gains in outcomes beyond global competencies. Virtual exchange programs yielded improvements in at least one secondary outcome — and usually in at least two. In the MENA region, the most frequently cited secondary outcomes were improved self-confidence and better presentation skills. In the U.S., participants credited virtual exchange for changing their behavior or inspiring them to take action in their communities.

Implications for Future Evaluation: Surveys results suggest recent participants in Stevens Initiative awardee programs experienced significant increases in some global competencies, though not in others, over the course of their participation. Although there were statistically significant increases overall on the knowledge seeking and empathy scales and on one of the cross-cultural collaboration scales, no signs of change were noted on the perspective-taking or cross-cultural collaboration scales — or even negative changes were noted — on some other scales. These results demonstrate the need to make programs and evaluation methods more effective. There are many possible interpretations of these findings. The findings could indicate that these global competencies were not affected by program participation, or they could indicate that the survey measures were not sufficiently targeted or sensitive to measure changes in these domains. Finally, it is possible that there is a ceiling effect — meaning that there was no growth because participants tended to start off rating themselves relatively high on these competencies on the pre-program survey and therefore had little room to demonstrate an increase on the post-program survey. To better assess these scales in the future, RTI has added additional retrospective questions to the survey template.

Effective Practices and Common Challenges in Virtual Exchange

The Stevens Initiative can point to several effective practices for implementing virtual exchanges as well as several challenges that are common across programs. These observations are informed by multiple sources, including evaluator observations of virtual exchange activities, interviews and focus groups with stakeholders, program observations, and expert commentary. It is important to remember that not every effective practice will be appropriate for all virtual exchange program models. Both the challenges and the practices are grouped below by common theme.

Program Design

Effective Practice: **Include in the curriculum cultural topics and structured opportunities for students to get to know one another.** Participants in virtual exchange programs almost universally request more time to get to know their cross-cultural partners. Many participants of past programs feel that there were few opportunities to engage one-on-one or in small groups, inhibiting their exchange experience. Opportunities for participants to get to know one another can take many forms, including synchronous ice-breaker activities or small-group discussions or asynchronous exchange of stories, blog posts, and/or videos about daily lives and personal experiences. These activities are particularly effective at the beginning of programs (leading to greater comfort in subsequent exchange activities) and when they are guided (i.e., instructions provided by the facilitators as opposed to a vague charge to get to know one another). Consider leaving room in the curriculum for the discussion of world events or other topics that may arise organically over the course of the exchange. It is important to prioritize intercultural sharing in program curricula even when topics are not explicitly culturally focused (e.g., STEM topics). Participants value the opportunity to learn about one another's culture, and in many cases cultural topics can be organically linked back to the curriculum. Facilitators should ensure that the content of the exchange resonates with both U.S. and MENA participants, and it may be best to avoid topics in which participants from one country have a strong deficiency in experience and familiarity compared with their counterparts, unless there is an opportunity for the reverse to happen.

Effective Practice: **If feasible, consider incorporating synchronous communication.** Synchronous communication activities require a significant time commitment and attention to schedules and technology platforms; however, participants often cite synchronous exchange as one of the most meaningful parts of a virtual exchange program. Synchronous exchange appears to be particularly popular with participants when they have an opportunity to interact with one another in small groups or one-on-one. Effective implementation of synchronous activities can require a skilled facilitator to encourage the exchange; quality translation is needed if there is a significant language barrier.

Challenge: **Scheduling exchanges, particularly with regard to different time zones and school schedules, can be complex.** Different calendars, school days and start times, and exam schedules all complicate the scheduling of exchange activities. Many practitioners note that, although participants frequently state a desire for synchronous exchange, these activities pose a unique challenge because of time differences. In particular, scheduling exchanges outside of normal school-time hours may not be feasible for many reasons (e.g., space, resources, safety).

Effective Practice: **Build flexibility and enough time into the curriculum for effective virtual exchange.** The need for flexibility in the program design is paramount, as shifting school schedules, technology failures, or other issues can delay program activities or otherwise cause them to go off schedule. For this reason, contingency plans are a necessity. Facilitators should both (1) build in extra time for activities that might take longer to implement and schedule and (2) plan extra activities if certain activities go faster than anticipated. Flexibility and adequate time can be incorporated into the design stage of program implementation. Participants, facilitators, and administrators frequently wish there were more time built into the exchange for meaningful engagement among participants. Teachers and administrators also note that planning the programs are time intensive, particularly in terms of identifying partner institutions and teachers and designing the curriculum. Therefore, when designing programs, it is important to allow plenty of time for planning.

Effective Practice: **Build in milestones/due dates for activities along the way to keep groups on track and motivated.** Particularly in cases in which participants are working on projects collaboratively outside of class time, it may be beneficial to set interim milestones for the project in order to keep groups on track. Project milestones can ensure that participants communicate with one another in a timely manner and experience a sufficient level of collaboration over the course of the semester. Additionally, seeing their peers or international group partners completing tasks can motivate students to take their roles seriously.

Challenge: **An unequal number of participants in different locations can inhibit connection.** When programs have significantly more participants on one side of the exchange than the other, participants receive less contact with peers from other places. When there are just a few participants in the program from one place, those participants can feel a burden to spend extra time on activities, to give their counterparts the opportunity to connect internationally. Rather than feeling like equal partners, they can feel like they are being used by the program. Large imbalances in participants can also mean that, if a single classroom or group is unable to connect, then the whole cohort could miss the opportunity to have international communication.

Effective Practice: **Plan for alumni engagement after the program ends.** Participants across programs express a desire to keep in touch with their co-participants and to stay connected to the program. Many who do not have formal opportunities to remain engaged try to continue informally (e.g., forming a WhatsApp group), but most recognize that those connections will likely fade over time with nothing formal in place. Some programs have used various means to build alumni engagement into their programs. For example, programs can integrate alumni into their facilitator or educator training and into recruiting pipelines. Some programs plan in-country/in-person reunions, and others plan structured virtual reunions for all participants, or both. When done well, alumni networks have the potential to continue to impact participants even after the program has ended.

Effective Practice: **Revisit the curriculum or agenda after each round of virtual exchange activities.** Virtual exchange programs are opportunities to consistently improve. In addition to reviewing which activities were effective and which can be refined or replaced, program implementors or facilitators can employ new models or adapt to new technologies or methods. Because the digital learning space is so dynamic, frequent evaluation of program components is necessary.

Effective Practice: **Provide training for participants on norms and expectations in communicating virtually with cross-cultural peers.** Because experience with cross-cultural communication varies among participants, basic training on communication norms and expectations should be provided in advance of the program. The exact training content will vary depending on the participants. Younger participants may need explanations of how time zone and school schedule differences may affect asynchronous communication, so that participants are not disappointed when they don't receive instantaneous responses from peers. Facilitators might want to have separate discussions with participants in each location about the challenges of communicating when one group of participants is using a language that is not native to them. Participants may also need guidance on topics such as how to follow up and be persistent if they do not receive responses from their peers and on cultural norms such as sensitivity in mixed-gender groups.

Technology

Challenge: **Various technology issues are cited across virtual exchange programs.** The most frequently cited technology issue remains connectivity, including failing or slow connections and lack of participant access to facilities with internet connectivity. Stakeholders in several programs have also mentioned problems with sound quality in conducting synchronous exchange. Additional barriers created by technology issues include a lack of access to needed equipment (e.g., participants not having laptops) and frustrations with technology platform (e.g., an exchange platform not being mobile phone compatible).

Effective Practice: **Provide multiple modes for communication.** Providing multiple ways for participants to communicate with one another can enrich the experience, help ensure that meaningful connections are forged, and provide a backup plan when technology fails. For example, even if formal program communication is held synchronously in class, asynchronous channels (e.g., using a message board or a WhatsApp group) should be available to participants as a means to engage during off-times.

Engagement and Incentives

Challenge: **Maintaining robust participant engagement is difficult, and participant attrition inevitably occurs during the program**. Virtual exchange implementors report common challenges in motivating students to maintain enthusiasm for program activities and to ensure that students complete all program components. In some cases, lack of engagement can be tied to the program curriculum, since participants remain engaged when topics feel relevant and meaningful but disengage when program components do not relate to their lives or studies or lack incentives/a clear purpose. Sometimes, engagement issues are cited when programs are only an extracurricular or not-for-credit activity; in these cases, engagement tends to drop off when participants got busy with mandatory classwork. Often, when engagement wanes, some participants drop out of the program entirely. This can cause a domino effect for engagement or attrition with international partners.

Effective Practice: **Consider incorporating relevant incentives for multiple stakeholders.** Many implementors use incentives as a motivator for active participation in the exchange, especially if the program is not credit bearing. One incentive that is particularly effective is an in-person component to the virtual exchange, even for a small, selected group of participants after the virtual exchange. Obviously, however, this is often not possible for many programs. Other effective incentives are certificates of completion or other credentials, alumni engagement opportunities, or access to professional networks or other resources. Incentives should not be limited to participants; consider offering incentives to educators or facilitators as well. Stakeholders report that stipends for these individuals for added work are useful, but a certificate or credential for their role in the virtual exchange program should also be considered. Certificates are often cited as meaningful motivators, particularly for individuals in the MENA region.

Facilitation and Facilitator Training

Effective Practice: **Provide adequate training to educators on how to launch and implement virtual exchanges.** Educators (i.e. faculty members, teachers, facilitators) need training in advance of program implementation on how to effectively conduct a virtual exchange. Topics to cover should include tips for engaging participants in synchronous exchange, troubleshooting technology issues, working with interpreters (if applicable), monitoring the content of exchanges, and managing conflicts that might arise between participants. The training should also include suggestions for how to be flexible in the face of uncertainty so the program can stay on track even if unexpected obstacles disrupt or delay activities. Program implementors should also be transparent with educators regarding the time commitment to conduct virtual exchanges, given the necessary curriculum planning, coordination, and communication with their international counterparts.

Effective Practice: **Coordinate in-person meetings between facilitators to plan exchange activities.** Although they come with expense and logistical challenges, in-person meetings between facilitators is an important component to virtual exchange that can greatly improve program implementation. Such meetings provide focused time for planning and curriculum development, but they also offer time to build trust and familiarity among facilitators. Having a familiar, established relationship with partner educators is crucial to effectively addressing the inevitable difficulties that arise during virtual exchange programs.

Challenge: **Developing an effective working relationship between facilitation partners is difficult.** Some virtual exchange programs face challenges connecting teachers and supporting them. Multiple issues can interfere with the development of this connection: for example, culture, capacity, approaches to communication, and instructional styles. In other cases, coordination and planning between facilitators can be delayed due to shifting program needs or staffing changes. Regardless of the source, impediments to this working relationship can negatively impact participants' virtual exchange experience and engagement with the program.

Oversight of Exchange Activities

Effective Practice: **Plan appropriate program oversight at all levels to ensure that exchange activities result in a connection between participants**. Many program models use program staff to match classes or groups; these staff members must ensure that connections are made and sustained, which may require more oversight and involvement than initially assumed. Forging connections and launching an exchange is a challenging process, and it is unrealistic to simply provide teachers or facilitators with contact information for their counterparts in the partner country and expect the exchange to successfully proceed. It is common for teachers to have difficulty reaching their counterparts or for other unforeseen obstacles to arise, and teachers or facilitators may not be equipped to troubleshoot. Programs must therefore closely monitor the connections between teachers/facilitators and step in when needed. Additionally, active oversight by facilitators/teachers may be necessary to ensure that participants are engaging in exchange activities. In many cases, facilitators who leave it up to the participants to initiate and sustain communication can create inadequate engagement and an unsatisfying exchange, and participants, particularly younger participants, may not yet have the confidence to continuously follow up if they are not hearing back from their partners.

Imbalances During Exchanges

Effective Practice: **It is important to incorporate the needs and interests of all partners and participants into virtual exchange curricula and implementation.** Participants frequently cite as challenges imbalances in a program, such as power imbalances or preference given to the needs or learning goals of just one group of participants rather than all participants on both sides of the exchange. Facilitators and administrators should remain in close contact throughout the exchange to ensure participants have an equal opportunity to learn.

Challenge: **The language used for the exchange can create challenges and have implications for the balance of the program.** English proficiency and interpretation issues are mentioned by virtual exchange programs as a barrier. This is not only limited to synchronous or verbal exchanges; it is present in written communication too. Many students have limited second-language proficiency and are uncomfortable posting messages to their partners. While translation/interpretation is an option for some programs, participants note that translation/interpretation can cause frustrating delays in the interaction. Because many virtual exchanges require communication in English, a Western-centric dynamic is often present from the beginning of the exchange. Even some U.S. participants expressed discomfort with the fact that their partners were expected to try to conduct the exchange in a foreign language and they were not expected to do the same.

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