

A program evaluation of an international, intercultural e-community-engagement initiative

Audrey F. Falk

*Applied Human Development and Community Studies, Merrimack College,
North Andover, Massachusetts, USA*

Martina Jordaan

University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Sameerah T. Saeed

English Language Teaching Department, Tishk International University, Erbil, Iraq

Madasu Bhaskara Rao

*ICFAI Business School, The ICFAI Foundation for Higher Education,
Hyderabad, India, and*

Nour El Houda Chaoui

*Department of Computer Science, Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University,
Fes, Morocco*

Abstract

Purpose – This program evaluation aimed to investigate the benefits and challenges of an international, intercultural, e-community-engagement experience involving youth and higher education students. The authors sought to understand the meaning that participants would make of an international, intercultural, e-community-engagement experience.

Design/methodology/approach – The program evaluation component of this project was qualitative, participatory and action-oriented. It was composed of online reflection sessions with small, international groups of higher education students from Iraq, India, Morocco, South Africa and the USA immediately following each of five interactive exchange sessions with youth from South Africa. It also included one culminating reflection session to which all of the higher education student participants were invited and a written questionnaire that was completed by the youth participants at the conclusion of the project. The reflection sessions were recorded and transcribed. Transcripts and survey data were reviewed for emergent themes.

Findings – Cultural exposure emerged as the primary theme with participants valuing the opportunity to learn about different cultures and to connect with individuals from across the globe.

Research limitations/implications – This program evaluation was not designed as a generalizable study. This pilot initiative provides evidence of the potential value and importance of international, intercultural e-community-engagement experiences for youth and higher education students.

Practical implications – The potential value of technology to build exchange opportunities for young people is immense and largely untapped. International, intercultural e-community-engagement initiatives can be made available to students globally with relatively limited resources. A highly structured and focused plan provides clarity about expectations and requirements for students. A high level of commitment is required by all participants, including the faculty coordinators.

Social implications – Although the project was brief, exposure to numerous countries and cultures allowed participants to challenge their assumptions about different peoples and places in the world. The potential benefits for greater compassion and understanding of communities and cultures in an international context are high.

Originality/value – This program evaluation contributes to and extends the literature on the possibilities and challenges of international e-community-engagement; it demonstrates the potential for e-community-engagement across multiple countries to broaden students' exposure to and interest in global perspectives.

Keywords Service, Community engagement, Cultural exchange, Civic identity development, E-service-learning, Remote learning, Intercultural learning, Global citizenship

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In the context of the Coronavirus pandemic, scholars from Iraq, Morocco, India, South Africa and the USA partnered on an international, intercultural e-community-engagement initiative. We sought to create opportunities for our higher education students to engage with one another and to engage in remote service. We included in our design of the project a program evaluation component so that we could explore the impact of the project on the participants and moreover, the benefits and challenges of international, intercultural e-community-engagement.

This was not a formal research project and the results of our program evaluation are not generalizable. However, the process of developing, implementing and evaluating this initiative led to extensive research and reflection about the potential value and obstacles of service initiatives that are international and remote. Furthermore, the overall experience was positive, promising and encouraging for us as scholars, for our students and for the youth of South Africa who were involved in the project. This article presents our project, our evaluation and our thoughts about the importance and implications of this work.

This work will be of interest to scholars and practitioners of higher education community engagement, including students, administrators, faculty and staff. It may also interest those involved in intercultural learning and global exchange initiatives and those seeking novel ways to utilize digital literacies. All who are concerned about higher education's commitment to the development of global citizens and the civic purposes of higher education are encouraged to take an interest in this work.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education institutions sought ways to continue providing education to students while following protocols to minimize the spread of the virus (Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021). Many higher education institutions (HEIs) across the globe reverted to learning through virtual platforms (Dhawan, 2020). While the COVID-19 pandemic impacted disciplines and units across HEIs, community engagement programs faced especially complex challenges of protecting students and community members while continuing to function. Community engagement scholars were pushed to deepen their engagement and re-envision their purpose and approaches (Ohmer *et al.*, 2022).

With HEIs investing in remote education technologies, faculty across the globe have had greater opportunities to network and collaborate from a distance. The combination of unprecedented global challenges and technological opportunities has created pathways for re-envisioning education and community engagement across geographical boundaries. HEIs espouse global citizenship missions and goals for student learning (Aykol *et al.*, 2021). In the context of globalization, careers and professional pathways increasingly require a global mindset and cultural competencies (Cseh *et al.*, 2013). With social issues and challenges affecting communities across the world, global networking and problem-solving are critical.

Encounters with diverse individuals and communities facilitate cultural competence (Campinha-Bacote, 2002). Structured opportunities to learn about different cultures and parts of the world can facilitate appreciation of different worldviews and perspectives. Studying abroad may have positive effects on students' intercultural competence (Maharaja, 2018). Recently, greater attention has been given to the potential benefits of virtual service learning (Garc'ia-Guti'errez *et al.*, 2021) and virtual cultural exchange initiatives (O'Dowd, 2021).

The term e-community-engagement is largely absent from the literature. There are references to virtual or remote community engagement in the literature which is essentially what we mean when we use the term e-community-engagement. For example, [Zisman-Ilani et al. \(2022\)](#) and [Plunk et al. \(2022\)](#) provide examples of real-world, field-based e-community-engagement in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the webpages of HEIs reference virtual and online community engagement in the context of higher education, the scholarly literature does not yet reflect these trends.

What is apparent in the scholarly literature is e-service-learning. The terms service learning and community engagement are not synonymous; however, they are related terms. Community engagement is a broader term referring to working with and on behalf of community members to address identified community needs and goals. In higher education community engagement, HEIs work collaboratively with communities to identify community needs and to partner with them in responding to these challenges or opportunities. Often, HEIs utilize service learning as a primary community engagement tool. The term service learning is generally used to focus on academic service learning. Service learning includes course-based learning that is activated through meaningful service activities which address identified community needs and are processed through intentional reflection exercises.

The initiative that is the focus of this article has a service aspect; however, the program was not course-based and, therefore, would not be considered academic service learning. Given the connection between our project and e-service-learning and the paucity of research on higher education e-community-engagement, this literature review focuses on e-service-learning. Below, we discuss the terms service-learning, intercultural learning, online learning, e-service-learning and intercultural e-service-learning to provide a scholarly context for our program evaluation.

Service learning

Service learning is built on John Dewey's theory of experiential learning that encompasses "learning by doing." It is a reflective, relational pedagogy that combines community or public service with structured opportunities for learning ([Heffernan, 2011](#)). In service learning, students apply theoretical knowledge in real-world settings to address community problems. Students enhance their understanding of theory through their service experiences ([Ferrari and Chapman, 2014](#)). Guided and intentional reflection assists students in making meaningful connections.

The scope of studies related to service learning includes the integration of service learning in a particular academic discipline; studies related to service learning frameworks and theories; the importance and significance of service learning for teaching and learning and reflections on service learning. Additionally, studies indicate that beneficial outcomes for students include understanding social issues ([Faulconer, 2021](#); [Celio et al., 2011](#)), civic attitudes ([Weiler et al., 2013](#)), team-building skills, communication skills, problem-solving skills ([Weiler et al., 2013](#)) and leadership development ([Lin et al., 2023](#)).

Intercultural learning

Cultural literacy is "the ability to read, understand and find the significance of diverse cultures and, as a consequence, to be able to evaluate, compare and decode the varied cultures that are interwoven in a place" ([Wood et al., 2006](#), p. 20). Intercultural competence requires cultural communication which is an interplay between culture and communication in human interactions, be it face-to-face or virtual. Culture includes ecology, history, socio-economic factors and values which, together with contextual factors, influence communication and behavior, i.e. what people say and do ([Salo-Lee, 2007](#)).

The internationalization of higher education requires offering students international learning experiences through both curricular and co-curricular activities. Providing such experiences helps students to reflect on themselves vis-à-vis others. Meaningful intercultural encounters that are grounded in tested frameworks can enable students to develop their intercultural competence and nurture qualities for global citizenship. Global citizenship is a multidimensional construct that is based on the interrelated dimensions of global competence, social responsibility and global civic engagement (Israel *et al.*, 2011; Morais and Ogen, 2011). Researchers have concluded that student awareness of self and others enhances intercultural competence (Le Roux, 2002). Given the globalized world that we are living in today, irrespective of the career paths students choose upon graduation, they will be working and living in a diverse cultural setting (McRae and Ramji, 2011).

Online learning

Although this initiative did not involve formal courses, our scholarly literature draws from the extensive literature on online learning. Learning experiences, in asynchronous or synchronous modes, using technological devices such as mobile phones, laptops, desktops and tablets, accessed through the Internet, are the essence of online learning. In an online learning environment, learners are independent (they can be anywhere) to learn and interact with their facilitators/instructors and other students. Online learning has the potential to be innovative, student-centered and flexible. Researchers have found that in online synchronous sessions, learners are focused and participate; they have a stronger sense of contribution to discussions, enhanced motivation and demonstrate better performance (Chen and You, 2007; Malkin *et al.*, 2018).

E-service-learning

E-service-learning includes a virtual component for one or more aspects of the service learning project (Waldner *et al.*, 2012). The concept of e-service-learning started to be implemented more frequently during the COVID-19 pandemic because it became more difficult to interact with people and visit different communities (Waldner *et al.*, 2012; Chen *et al.*, 2011).

Research provides evidence of positive experiences and outcomes for learning and service performance in e-service-learning that is similar to face-to-face experiences. Students have achieved similar learning outcomes from an e-service-learning project as from a traditional service learning project (Waldner *et al.*, 2012; Soria and Weiner, 2013; Schwehm *et al.*, 2017; Gasper-Hulvat, 2018; Marcus *et al.*, 2019; Figuccio, 2020; Lin and Shek, 2021). While the lack of face-to-face, onsite service modality may be viewed as a deficit, alternatively, it may reduce the stress and anxiety of face-to-face interaction (Dapena *et al.*, 2022; Figuccio, 2020; Schmidt, 2021).

Intercultural e-service-learning

Intercultural learning is important for creating global citizens and community engagement can accelerate this process. When adding an intercultural component to an e-service-learning project, students have the enriched experience of being exposed to different cultures (Waldner *et al.*, 2012). E-service-learning reduces geographic barriers, permitting students to extend their projects to other communities as well as other countries, thereby enhancing global citizenship (Soria and Weiner, 2013; Marcus *et al.*, 2019; Bharath, 2020; Faulconer, 2021; Chan *et al.*, 2020, 2021) and providing students with an opportunity to connect globally with other like-minded students (García-Gutiérrez *et al.*, 2017; Harris, 2017; Schwehm *et al.*, 2017; Chan *et al.*, 2020, 2021; Ngai *et al.*, 2021).

Methods

We designed an international, intercultural, e-community-engagement initiative with a program evaluation to gauge impact and interest and to gather feedback pertinent to the benefits and challenges of participation. We believed that an international, intercultural, e-community-engagement initiative could have a wide range of benefits for students, learners and ourselves, including, but not limited to international networks, growth in cultural competence and appreciation of diversity and a sense of global citizenship. As a pilot project, this program evaluation was exploratory in nature and sought to gather and understand participants' experiences as well as recommendations for similar future initiatives.

Participants

Scholars from five HEIs who were connected with one another as Country Directors for the International Higher Education Teaching and Learning Association (HETL), a non-governmental professional association, embarked on an international, virtual, community engagement initiative focused on cultural exchange. Institutions represented in this initiative include the University of Pretoria (South Africa), Tishk International University Erbil (Iraq), the ICFAI Foundation for Higher Education (India), Sidi Mohamed Ben Abedellah University (Morocco) and Merrimack College (USA). Falk (USA) and Jordaan (South Africa) put forth a call to all HETL Country Directors in November 2021 seeking partners for an international, intercultural, virtual initiative. Saeed (Iraq), Rao (India) and El Houda Chaoui (Morocco) responded to this call. Jordaan and Falk have served as coordinators and lead writers for this initiative with active involvement and participation of all five faculty in a non-hierarchical and collaborative fashion.

The project design was to have a total of 25 higher education students from five HEIs divided into five international groups and 25 youth in South Africa participate in the project along with the five co-author facilitators. The final counts were 23 higher education students and 28 youth. The size of the project was dictated by what seemed reasonable for diverse higher education student teams; the size of the computer labs available for youth; and the number of persons who can interact in a Zoom-based environment.

Purposive sampling was used to identify student participants. Participating students represented a variety of faculties and disciplines, including primarily undergraduate students and a small number of Master's level students, and were recruited on a voluntary basis from the five participating HEIs. Student ages ranged from 18 to 32 years old. The average age was 26 years old. The mode and the median were 21. [Table 1](#) provides the institutions and the areas of study for the 23 higher education students.

Youth participants were from the University of Pretoria Pre-University Academy (UP-PUA), a program which prepares secondary school students for higher education. UP-PUA youth from grades 8, 9, 10 and 12 participated in this project (see [Table 2](#)). UP-PUA is located at the Mamelodi campus of the University of Pretoria and serves students living in the Township. During apartheid, townships were segregated areas where people categorized by the government as Black, Brown or of Indian descent were forced to live with minimal resources and infrastructure. UP-PUA is designed for opportunity youth who are primarily students of color from the Township of Mamelodi who are being prepared for higher education, consistent with the University of Pretoria's efforts to pursue racial representation within the student body of the institution.

Recruitment and selection

Recruitment of higher education student participants was conducted by the five faculty members who are authors of this manuscript. Each faculty member was responsible for recruiting participants from their institution. Recruitment included outreach to select

Table 1.
Higher education
student participants,
current programs and
majors

Students from the University of Pretoria, South Africa	Bachelor of Engineering, Computer Science IV Bachelor of Engineering, Electronic Engineering III Bachelor of Engineering, Computer Engineering IV Bachelor of Commerce, Extended Curriculum Program I Bachelor of Science, Extended Curriculum Program I
Students from Tishk International University, Iraq	Bachelor of Science in Medical Analysis Bachelor of Science in Accounting Bachelor of Science in Interior Design Engineering Bachelor of Science in Business and Management
Students from Merrimack College, USA	Master of Education in Community Engagement (3 students) Bachelor of Arts in Human Development and Human Services (1 student)
The ICFAI Foundation for Higher Education, Hyderabad, India	Bachelor of Technology, Computer Science Engineering (3 students) Bachelor of Technology, Mechatronics (1 student) Bachelor of Technology, Data Science and Artificial Intelligence (1 student)
Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University, Fez, Morocco	Bachelor of Computer Engineering Bachelor of Networks and Telecommunications (2 students) Preparatory classes, 1st year Preparatory classes, 2nd year
Source(s): Authors	

Table 2.
UP-PUA participants
by grade

Number of learners per grade participating in this initiative	Grade 8	Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 12	Total
	3	19	5	1	28
Source(s): Authors					

students and more general outreach to particular groups of students. We highlighted the opportunity to connect with individuals in different countries, to be involved in e-community-engagement and to have a resume-building experience. Higher education students were selected based on their availability during the required timeframes, ability to speak and understand the English language, access to the Internet and devices to participate in online sessions, and willingness to participate. Information, assent and guardian consent forms were distributed to youth in the UP-PUA program with a focus on recruitment of eighth and ninth graders. The first youth from UP-PUA to submit their forms were included in this project. The ninth graders had prior experience with an international virtual exchange unrelated to this project which may explain the high level of participation among ninth graders. The twelfth grader learned about the opportunity through word-of-mouth.

Project goals

In pursuing this project, we were interested in exploring whether participants would be motivated and interested in the project; what they would view as the benefits of participation; and how they would articulate the value and impact of the project. We wanted to understand the challenges faced by participants so that we could take these into consideration in any future iterations of the project. We sought to engage participants with a high level of

autonomy and involvement in the project and to encourage students to view their feedback as a way to help chart the future in regard to international, intercultural e-community-engagement.

Overview of activities

Five teams of about five university students were formed generally consisting of one student from each of the participating universities. Each team was assigned topics pertinent to culture: food and festivals, clothes and fashion, music and dance, sports and hobbies, and movies and entertainment. These topics were identified in advance by the faculty authors as ones that represented a broad spectrum of cultural themes that would likely be accessible and of interest to participants. Student teams had periodic preparatory meetings online, discussed and coordinated content for their presentation, developed a PowerPoint presentation, and prepared and delivered one-hour interactive sessions with the UP-PUA youth. Teams were directed to take an international approach to their presentations, sharing about their own cultures.

An online orientation session on Zoom for the higher education students included a review of project details; timelines; topics to be covered in the online interactive sessions; division of teams; and expectations, roles and commitments. The orientation session was recorded and a link to the recording was provided to all higher education student participants. A contact list of all higher education student participants and all faculty facilitators was also shared with the students. An advisor (author) was assigned to each team and a lead student coordinator was identified by each team. For the purpose of connecting with each other and developing a presentation plan, international teams were divided into breakout rooms toward the end of the orientation session.

Teams were allowed to choose the content and organization of their presentation, but all presentations were required to be interactive. Advisors provided support and drafts of PowerPoint presentations were required at least 48 h in advance of presentations so facilitators could review the materials and provide feedback. Youth presentations were scheduled according to agreed-upon dates and times, and teams were asked to provide input regarding availability and scheduling preferences.

Planning was facilitated through the use of different technologies, such as emails and WhatsApp. The use of technology in this way was not only efficient but also allowed for communication between team members who were based in different parts of the world. The faculty facilitators guided the teams during the development of the presentation and provided feedback. The lead student coordinator for each team was responsible for managing the team and communicating with the faculty facilitator.

A total of five interactive sessions involving the international student teams and the UP-PUA youth were held via Zoom in May and June 2022. Advisors were expected to attend the session of their respective team. Sessions generally included a cultural presentation, a group activity, a question-and-answer segment and a demonstrative activity. A total of 19 UP-PUA youth participated in the first session, 22 in the second session, 17 in the third and fourth sessions and 13 in the fifth session. Five youth participated in all five sessions.

Evaluation of the project

We used a qualitative design to explore the impact of our project on participants and the benefits and challenges of our international, intercultural, e-community-engagement initiative. Qualitative research is transdisciplinary and involves the exploration of human experience (Ravitch and Carl, 2016). As described by Ravitch and Carl (2016), qualitative research is descriptive, complex and interactive and highlights the role of the researcher as a meaning-maker.

Action research focuses on understanding processes and experiences in the real world (Stringer, 2007). Stringer (2007) explained that action research seeks to be non-hierarchical through the involvement of stakeholders as experts on their lives and experiences. This program evaluation sought to involve students through weekly reflections which provided feedback to enhance subsequent sessions. While the orientation provided general guidelines, participating higher education students had a high level of autonomy in the development and delivery of their interactive presentations with the UP-PUA youth. The final reflection provided students with another opportunity to make meaning of their experiences together along with faculty advisors. Along these lines, the evaluation included formative and summative elements and examined processes and outcomes. We sought to understand the experience of all stakeholder groups, including higher education students, UP-PUA youth and our experiences as facilitators.

The reflection sessions held with students as a follow-up to each weekly presentation were typically led by the author-facilitator for the presenting group. We used a standard set of reflection prompts which included the following.

- (1) What was your experience interacting with your group?
- (2) What are your takeaways from this experience?
- (3) How effectively did your team work together?
- (4) What do you feel was the impact of the project?
- (5) If a program is offered again, what recommendations do you have?
- (6) What was most challenging for you?

The reflection prompts gave students the opportunity to communicate about their experiences in preparing for the presentation, to identify challenges and to explore the youths' responses to the topic. A final reflection session was attended by 15 students who discussed the lessons they learned during the planning and execution of the project, the most challenging aspects of the project, their experience with the online presentation, and their future plans in regard to international and intercultural engagement. Each session was recorded and reflection sessions were transcribed.

An online questionnaire with open-ended questions was used to obtain feedback from participating youth regarding their reflections, perspectives, insights and lessons learned through participation in the cultural exchange project; what the greatest challenges were in participating in the project; what was the most interesting part of the whole experience; and any suggestions for improvement.

Utilizing a participatory action research approach, the five authors met regularly throughout the project's implementation to discuss and monitor the project. We discussed each session at length as well as feedback from reflection sessions and we made suggestions to groups based upon the experiences that were shared with us. For example, some of the earlier groups found that Kahoot! and chocolates as prizes worked extremely well so we encouraged groups planning forthcoming presentations to try similar approaches.

We used a consensus approach whereby we reviewed data individually and discussed data as a group and we collectively agreed to key themes and interpretations. We met frequently over Zoom throughout and following implementation of the project to identify and discuss emergent themes. This was a lengthy process because we come from a variety of disciplines, we have varying degrees of experience with community engagement, and we also have different cultural perspectives. Patience, listening, trust and mutual respect were critical to our collaborative meaning-making process.

Results

Below we describe the benefits of the project from the perspective of the higher education students, youth and authors, as well as the challenges that emerged in implementation.

Higher education students

The higher education students involved in the project valued it immensely. In the reflection sessions, they expressed gratitude for the opportunity to participate in the project and a high level of appreciation of the overall experience. A student from India remarked, "I would like to thank everybody that participated and encouraged this project and it was truly a remarkable experience for me and my friends from the university. I got to learn a lot through this communication and meeting people from around the world."

In particular, the higher education students greatly valued the opportunity to meet with and connect with one another; they appreciated the opportunity to engage with the UP-PUA youth; and they expressed gratitude to the facilitators for arranging this initiative. A student from the USA commented, "I loved it. It was so great meeting everyone on the team and interacting with the learners. I never had an opportunity like this before so this was a first for me and I really enjoyed it."

Across all sessions, the higher education students experienced the UP-PUA youth as highly interested and engaged and this seemed to make the higher education students feel valued as well. At the final reflection session, a higher education student from South Africa observed, "the kids were even taking notes." The higher education students spoke about appreciating when the UP-PUA youth would unmute themselves to make a comment or ask a question and how wonderful it was to see their smiles on the screen.

The higher education students enjoyed learning about various cultural topics from an international perspective and from the lens of peers in other countries. In some cases, they also gained new knowledge of technology and apps such as WhatsApp and Kahoot! The opportunity piqued their interest in different cultures and countries. A student from Morocco stated, "This experience taught us how to communicate with other nationalities and cultures." It seemed to be a highly motivating and inspiring experience for the higher education students.

UP-PUA youth

The youth from UP-PUA thoroughly enjoyed participating in the project as well. One youth noted, "It was a very educational and fun experience and I also got to meet diverse people from different parts of the world." In their questionnaires, they wrote about how much they valued being with one another and how much they liked and appreciated the higher education students. Overwhelmingly, they appreciated the cultural learning experience and they expressed pride in their newly acquired knowledge and a desire to share their learning with family and friends. Youth identified doing more research on countries, trying to make foods they learned about, and travelling outside of their country as aspirations for utilization of their new knowledge. They appreciated the high level of engagement, noting that they enjoyed the Kahoot! games, chocolates and dancing, for example. The cultural topics were relatable and interesting for the youth to learn about such as fashion and sports. Furthermore, the experience of using Zoom was novel to them and they liked having the opportunity to do so.

Faculty facilitators

As the five international faculty involved in this initiative, the project exceeded our expectations and we were impressed by the level of engagement and creativity shown by

everyone involved. We as scholars from varied disciplines in different parts of the world who were mostly strangers to one another at the beginning of the project, connected only through our affiliation with the International Higher Education Teaching and Learning Association, developed close bonds and a great appreciation for one another through leadership of this initiative. We were impressed and inspired by the maturity, the leadership and diligence of each of the international teams and we were also delighted that the UP-PUA youth were persistent and enthusiastic about each session.

Implementation challenges

During the implementation of the project, facilitators encountered the following challenges: ensuring that all participants had access to the necessary bandwidth and Internet connections; ensuring that all participants were able to understand and follow the instructions and presentations given; supporting participants to work together harmoniously; ensuring that all participants could participate in the discussions and activities; and ensuring that the project was completed on schedule.

Participants had to overcome several challenges; for example, it was difficult to get everyone online at the same time, and some participants were only able to access the Internet for short periods of time. The fact that participants were located across the globe presented another challenge. In some countries, the project dates coincided with the period of preparation or exams for students, which made their attendance very difficult. One student remarked that as working groups, communication through email or WhatsApp was slow because students might be reaching out during hours that for other students was the middle of the night. Youth also noted technical challenges. Participants were required to be flexible and adapt to different time zones and working hours.

Impact: cultural exposure

Students and youth enjoyed learning about one another and one another's cultures and traditions. The experience excited students and left them wanting more, including more opportunities for remote connections as well as travel. Some of the higher education students also acknowledged that they learned more about their own cultures and became more interested in their own cultures as well. One student stated, "Personally, I was not participating in them and now I am interested to participate in my own cultural festivals."

Representative comments of youth included:

- (1) "It was a very educational and fun experience and I also got to meet diverse people from different parts of the world."
- (2) "In the past 5 weeks, I learned about many things. I learned about some of the countr [ies] and what they eat in that country . . . I learned about different foods . . . I learned about other people's culture and what they wear."
- (3) "I learned about clothes of Indian people and their festivals that how they work when they celebrate mostly what I like about them is that they like singing and dancing."

Related to cultural exposure, students recognized the value of communicating with peers across time and space. At the same time, they described the challenges of real-time communication across different time zones and understanding one another whether due to different accents or different words used that have a cultural meaning or are preferred ways to describe something in one place vs another. This was a growth area for participants and they recognized that the practice of intercultural communication would prepare them better for future encounters in a global society. Similarly, the higher education students enjoyed working as part of diverse international teams. They recognized the potential for projects like

this to inspire more cultural appreciation and understanding. For example, a student from Iraq noted, “We can incorporate more countries and do something amazing.”

The higher education students felt that their teams were generally effective with reasonably balanced participation of all members and respect for each members’ contributions. On the whole, the students had positive experiences collaborating with one another.

Discussion

We believed that international, intercultural, e-community-engagement could impact participants in many ways, including their cultural competence, cultural humility and sense of global citizenship. This pilot, exploratory program evaluation suggests that even a short-term initiative can provide sufficient cultural exposure to activate participants’ imaginations about the importance and value of international and intercultural interactions and exchanges.

The literature on the value of intercultural e-service-learning for students is extensive and multifaceted. Researchers found associations of intercultural e-service-learning with multicultural awareness (Waldner *et al.*, 2012), global citizenship (Soria and Weiner, 2013; Marcus *et al.*, 2019; Bharath, 2020; Faulconer, 2021; Chan *et al.*, 2020, 2021) and global connectedness (García-Gutiérrez *et al.*, 2017; Harris, 2017; Schwehm *et al.*, 2017; Chan *et al.*, 2020, 2021; Ngai *et al.*, 2021), for example. Breen and Robinson (2019) identified connections with communication and collaboration skills. We are excited about the connections that we see between the literature and our preliminary findings.

Similarly, a variety of computer, technical, software and Internet issues were identified as challenges in the scholarly literature (Fong *et al.*, 2022; Waldner *et al.*, 2012; Plata and Moredo, 2021; Lin *et al.*, 2023; Dapena *et al.*, 2022). While these may not have been the same technological issues that our participants faced, the general issue of technical challenges seems pervasive in e-community-engagement.

Moving forward, we would like to continue to develop projects that extend our understanding of the promise and challenges of international, intercultural, e-community-engagement, and we would like to identify more formal measures and processes to study these initiatives. Despite the limitations of this program evaluation, we believe that it points to the value of intercultural experiences for helping individuals recognize our common humanity across geographic divides. We think these experiences can be transformative for students in helping them to develop their identities as global citizens. Pragmatically, our program evaluation points to the importance of proactively addressing technology needs in order to facilitate virtual engagement.

This project and evaluation, while modest and preliminary, have generated excitement for us as faculty members about the possibilities for collaboration among ourselves and our students in order to deepen our students’ knowledge and identities as global citizens, to build relationships that pave the way for global understanding and peace, and to offer students access to and opportunities for global perspectives without the resources required for international travel. We have been persuaded that individuals’ sense of global citizenship can be developed through the innovative use of digital technologies and the collaborative work of globally-distributed teams.

Even a relatively small, short-term project such as this one can have a meaningful impact on the lives of youth and higher education students. We hope that readers will be inspired to invest the time to initiate projects like this one. Furthermore, we would like to see higher education institutions provide support for international, interdisciplinary collaboration through the provision of resources such as time, international networking and professional development opportunities, technology, and incentives for this work.

One interesting element of this initiative for us was the involvement of higher education faculty and students from a wide range of disciplines. Transdisciplinary approaches are essential to addressing societal needs and are therefore considered an important element of community engagement. Bringing together an international, interdisciplinary community is challenging, yet essential, to global engagement.

Conclusion

This program evaluation sought to explore the potential value of an international, intercultural e-community-engagement initiative. We found a high level of engagement and enjoyment on the part of the higher education students and the youth involved in the project. The project was effective in bringing together individuals from five different countries through technology and giving them exposure to one another's countries and cultural backgrounds. Participation was motivational and inspiring and suggested that technologically mediated intercultural engagement is a reasonable alternative to study abroad and international travel for high school students and higher education students. Despite the identified challenges such as time zones and time more generally as well as Internet bandwidth, this program evaluation supports the continued utilization of e-community-engagement to provide access to cultural exposure that is often available only to those with significant financial resources.

Limitations and directions for future research

The limitations of this project and its evaluation are the small number of students and youth involved in the project; the small number of countries, higher education institutions, and faculty involved in the project; the requirement of English proficiency; and the single topical area of culture. Furthermore, the evaluation could be strengthened with more formalized instruments and a longitudinal component to evaluate the longer-term impact of participation. Future initiatives could expand into other learning areas and include greater numbers of students, youth and global partners. The project could be replicated in other languages or with the use of translation resources.

It would be difficult to build a project with so many countries, time zones and constituent groups involved that was fully course-based. While having the project be extracurricular presented the challenge of recruitment, we were able to involve higher education students and youth who were interested and available to participate. For a project like this to be successful, we believe an intrinsic desire to participate is important. That said, we can envision how international, intercultural, e-community-engagement could be modified for application to formal courses.

Reliance on the use of English only was a challenge. We had to think about how to support effective communication between the participants, especially since their levels of English language exposure and proficiency varied. Students were encouraged to be mindful of language differences when working together and creating their presentations. In addition, it was helpful to include a South African university student in each international team to create a cultural bridge between the students and the learners.

Practical and theoretical implications

From a practical perspective, international, intercultural e-community-engagement extends the capacity of higher education institutions to advance their missions to develop global citizens. It is a cost-effective, accessible alternative to more costly options such as international exchange and study abroad. There are inherent practical challenges such as time zones and Internet bandwidth but we found the practical hurdles to be manageable and even valuable for

students. Encountering these real-world challenges provided natural opportunities for students to hone their teamwork and critical thinking skills. Our project offered youth from a marginalized community exposure to college students from their own country and four additional countries. From a pragmatic perspective, the potential for access and intercultural connection through technologically mediated communication is revolutionary.

Theories pertinent to the development and enhancement of cultural competence and cultural humility emphasize the fundamental importance of cultural exposure. Existing conceptual frameworks can be developed to explore and capitalize on the synergies between e-community-engagement and cultural competence.

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Corresponding author
Audrey F. Falk can be contacted at: falka@merrimack.edu