ROTARY YOUTH EXCHANGE – VIRTUAL EXCHANGES

What is a virtual exchange?

Virtual exchanges are an engaging alternative to in-person exchanges, providing young people a unique opportunity to interact and collaborate with people from other cultures and communities online. When they are structured, safe, and developed with specific goals and student outcomes in mind, virtual exchange experiences can be just as valuable as physically going abroad, allowing young people to engage in intercultural dialogue and meet people with different viewpoints from around the world. They can also help students challenge stereotypes, increase empathy, and develop intercultural competencies – all of which can help them develop the knowledge and skills needed to become global citizens and peacebuilders.

What are the benefits of a virtual exchange?

Virtual exchanges promote diversity and inclusion. One of the greatest benefits of virtual exchanges is that they are inclusive and accessible by nature, making international, cross-cultural educational experiences available to a greater number of young people. They also provide an opportunity for students from vastly different backgrounds to come together. As valuable as physical exchange experiences are, there are many barriers that keep young people from participating, including cost, strict educational requirements, physical or mental health challenges, travel restrictions, or even personal family obligations. A virtual exchange can provide underserved, underrepresented, or marginalized youth in your communities – who have just as much to contribute to intercultural dialogue – the opportunity to engage in meaningful conversations that help promote respect and understanding across cultures.

Virtual exchanges develop students' global competencies and leadership skills. Connecting virtually is becoming more the norm than the exception. Using digital communication tools like Zoom, Skype, Google, Facebook, Instagram, etc., students not only have the chance to learn about other cultures and backgrounds, but with proper guidance students can also learn how to interact effectively and collaboratively with others in a digital space.

Virtual exchanges enhance past cross-cultural experiences and fuel curiosity for new ones. For young people who have had the chance to experience a physical exchange or who have traveled abroad, a virtual exchange can give them an opportunity to deepen their understanding. For those who may not have the opportunity, a virtual exchange can prepare or empower them to pursue an in-person exchange experience later in their academic or professional career.

How can I develop a <u>meaningful</u> virtual exchange experience for my students?

We live in a hyper-connected world, where students can access information or connect with someone anywhere in the world in a matter of seconds. Technology is a valuable tool, but that alone will not foster deep cross-cultural understanding. If you are thinking about facilitating virtual exchanges in your district, keep in mind that a meaningful exchange:

- *has structure, specific goals, and learning objectives, as well a way to evaluate success.* Before arranging a virtual exchange, think about what you want students to get out of the experience (or what they want out of it) and structure your program in a way that will help them meet those goals. Then think about how you will monitor their progress and the tools you'll use to determine whether the program achieved the outcomes you hoped for, perhaps through surveys or feedback.

- *is designed to be intentional.* Intercultural learning does not happen through cross-cultural interactions alone. For deep engagement, foster students' intercultural competency development through creating a structured program that incorporates guided facilitation with volunteers throughout the process, so students have a chance to reflect upon, think critically, and talk about what they're learning with others. Remember that good facilitators should never tell students what they've learned - instead it's important to guide students through meaningful conversations.
- *prepares, guides, and then debriefs students.* Although students participating in virtual exchanges may not be physically traveling abroad, in addition to guided facilitation, outbound orientations and debriefings are equally important. Not only is it necessary to prepare students about online safety, it's also important to prepare them for cross-cultural learning. For example, before students take part in a virtual exchange, let them talk about what some known stereotypes of or beliefs about the other culture may be, why they may have these assumptions, and how they can challenge (or validate) these assumptions throughout their exchange experience. When the virtual program is over, allow students to have a reflective dialogue with each other about differences and the benefits of understanding issues from multiple perspectives – a skill that helps develop intercultural competence.
- *empowers students to come up with ideas – and then act.* Help students transform ideas into action. Consider a project-based exchange, having students tackle a social issue within their own communities and talk with each other on ways to approach it. Perhaps have students work with Interact clubs and work together on a global project. There are many ways to inspire students to use what they're learning for good, and the best virtual exchanges will have an impact that extends beyond online interactions. Use our Service Learning Curriculum in Rotary's Learning Center as the framework for a service-minded virtual exchange that empowers students to take on an international service project together.
- *incorporates a variety of virtual tools and engages the community.* Consider allowing participants to enhance their exchange interactions by exploring virtual tools that could support their cultural understanding. For example, many museums have virtual tours with engaging immersion activities for little to no cost. Another idea would be to invite local community leaders to take part in virtual conversations – invite a teacher, government official, or healthcare professional to bring a new perspective to what students are learning about.
- *prioritizes the safety and well-being of participants.* The internet can be a powerful and positive tool, especially for engaging youth. While the physical safety risks are greatly reduced with a virtual exchange, technology poses an entirely new set of risks to students' safety. In addition to ensuring all RI policy and certification requirements are followed as they would be for a traditional exchange, be sure to include specific guidelines for electronic communication. Below you'll find some important safety considerations that will help you create meaningful experiences while keeping students safe online. You can also consult Rotary's Youth Protection Guide for additional considerations on youth safety.

Electronic/Online safety considerations

In addition to ensuring compliance with RI policy (and Youth Exchange certification requirements where applicable), it is the responsibility of those who administer virtual activities to understand local laws related to data privacy and internet use involving minors, and to see that volunteers and program participants abide by them. If you are considering developing virtual exchanges or using technology to engage young people in other ways, we encourage you to consult with local youth-serving organizations and legal experts to confirm the standard level of care needed in your area to undertake these types of activities. Also consider these additional general safety guidelines:

Establish boundaries and expectations. Ensure your district has a comprehensive youth protection policy that outlines appropriate standards specifically for electronic communication/social media usage between volunteers and youth, as well as between youth program participants themselves. Your policy (and any consequences for violating it) should be communicated clearly to volunteers, youth, and their families, so that everyone is aware of the expectations before activities begin. Determine how to incorporate the following into your district policy:

Communication:

- To ensure communication is appropriate and transparent between volunteers (including peer mentors) and youth participant(s), consider requiring that all communications (e.g. email, text message, etc.) have a second adult copied, whether it be a vetted volunteer or the student's parent. This helps decrease the risk for misunderstandings or inappropriate interactions.
- Outline specific times for when communication can be sent between volunteers and youth (e.g. during the day only). If communication occurs outside of the designated timeframe, that could serve as a warning that interactions between volunteers and/or participants should be monitored more closely.
- Adults (or peer mentors) should not maintain private social media connections with a youth program participant and should only use social media to communicate to a closed page/group of several participants.

Sharing or re-sharing participant content:

- Photos or personal information about a youth program participant should never be shared without the express permission and knowledge of their parent or legal guardian.
- Stories about and images of youth program participants should not be shared or posted until they have completed their program or activity, and only with the participant's and their parents' consent.
- Never tag a minor or share their username or handle online. This could threaten their safety by revealing their interests or the locations they visit often.

Educate everyone on how to exhibit appropriate behavior and to keep young people safe. When it comes to keeping students protected in a digital age, one of the most important things to do is to educate volunteers, students and their families about online threats and what they can do to keep themselves and others safe. In addition to ensuring you have a comprehensive youth protection policy that requires participants and volunteers are properly screened and trained, below are some key elements to incorporate into your conversations and training materials related specifically to online safety.

Understand common threats to online student safety:

- **Online grooming** – Predators can be anyone – both adults and young people alike – and will befriend young people online in order to take advantage of them. Once they've gained their trust, they may encourage students to engage in inappropriate behavior, including sharing inappropriate images and videos, or persuading them to meet in person.

- **Cyberbullying** – Bullying that happens online can be just as devastating to a young person (or worse) because the internet enables individuals to say or do things they wouldn't normally do face-to-face.
- **Reputational risks** – What is shared online can stay around indefinitely - even if it's a "temporary" post or message. Remind students that they should only post or share things online that they would be comfortable sharing with their family, teachers or a future employer.
- **Peer pressure** – Peers have an enormous influence on each other and can persuade each other to act in certain ways, or engage in behaviors, that can be harmful – including risky online games, sending inappropriate photos, or bullying.

Before students participate in any online activity, remind students to:

- **Avoid emotional posting.** Before engaging in any communication, students should make sure they are not upset or angry, and that they are prepared to make smart decisions about what they send, share or post - and with whom.
- **Be respectful of others**. Talk with students about the consequences of their actions, and to always treat others as they would want to be treated.
- **Remain as anonymous as possible**. Students should never share:
    - Their full name or even the names of their family members (including pets!)
    - Specific locations they are currently visiting /often visit (and be sure to turn off GPS apps or other mobile location settings that may already be built in)
    - Home or school address, or the addresses of any of your friends or family
- **Keep personal information private**. Ensure that privacy settings are activated on social media sites and/or mobile apps and remind students to only connect with people they know. They should also be careful when creating email addresses, screen names, social media handles, to ensure that any aliases they may be using do not include any personal information about them.
- **Think before sharing photos/images of themselves or others.** What students share may remain online forever, so remind students of the risks of sharing information or pictures of themselves or others – including the consequences of others using their photos without their consent.
- **Speak up!** Students should feel empowered and encouraged to report anything that makes them feel uncomfortable, for any reason, including the treatment of others online or receiving inappropriate messages or images from someone.

Volunteers and parents must be prepared to support students as they navigate online activities. To do this, it is essential that they:

- **Understand the warning signs of cyber abuse**. Monitor students and look out for "red flags" that could indicate a student is being bullied or abused, such as changes in their behavior or attitude (see [Rotary's Youth Protection Guide](#)). Check in often to let them know you care about their emotional well-being.
- **Empower students.** Help students feel empowered to advocate for their own safety and feel comfortable making their personal boundaries known. Work with them to develop ways to deal with difficult situations and to speak up when they notice something wrong.
- **Invite students to be part of the conversation**. Students may know more about current threats to their safety than adults. They should be involved in discussions about how to keep themselves, and fellow participants, safe. And, by creating an open line of communication, students may feel more comfortable speaking up if something happens.
- **Engage students in productive, structured, and meaningful activities**. When students have a specific goal to focus on, or a cause to contribute to or that they are passionate about, they are less likely to engage in destructive or inappropriate behavior.

Below are some examples of appropriate and inappropriate interactions that you can use to illustrate productive behaviors and establish boundaries between adults and youth, as well as between youth participants themselves.

Verbal/written interactions. Keeping verbal interactions between adults and youth appropriate is just as important as maintaining appropriate physical boundaries.

Acceptable verbal/written interactions	Unacceptable verbal/written interactions
- Positive reinforcement - Jokes in general - Encouragement - Praise - Administrative information or notifications about the activity	- Calling someone names - Adults discussing sexual encounters or their personal problems with youth participants - Adults asking youth to keep secrets of any kind - Cursing - Discriminatory or sexual jokes - Shaming or belittling someone - Harsh language that may frighten, threaten, or humiliate youths - Making negative remarks about a participant or their family, culture, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, or background - Commenting on or complimenting a person's body or body development

Electronic and online interactions. Communicating with participants by text message, email, social media, or personal phone presents new challenges to keeping participants safe.

Guidelines for electronic communication	What to avoid in electronic communication
- Copy or include another volunteer or the participant's parent or guardian - Communicate with multiple participants in a closed group, or use a website or social media page that are not visible to the public - Counselors, advisers, and host parents might be allowed to exchange messages with a participant without supervision if they have the prior approval of program leadership and parents	- Harsh, coercive, threatening, intimidating, derogatory, or humiliating comments - Sexual conversations or images - Private messages between a volunteer and a youth without prior approval - Posting pictures of youth participants on social media sites without parental consent - Posting inappropriate comments on pictures

Thank you for the support you provide to Rotary's young people, and for your efforts to help create safe, meaningful, and engaging experiences for our youth. Questions? Email youthprotection@rotary.org.