

## Facilitation for Virtual Exchanges

(Presented by Fahad Ahmad, Interim CEO of Soliya)



The world is more interdependent than ever before, and the challenges of the 21st Century, whether they pertain to the environment, the economy or our security, require multilateral solutions. It is critical, therefore, that we provide the next generation with the skills they need to collaboratively address these challenges. Exchange programs present one model for providing future leaders with the requisite critical thinking, cross-cultural communication and collaboration skills. The costs and logistical challenges of such programs, however, prevent this model from reaching all but a privileged few - less than 2% of American college students study abroad, for example. It is critical therefore that we provide vastly more young adults with the skills they need to respectfully interact in today's interdependent world.

Soliya, an international non-profit organization and implementing partner of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, has been advancing the field of virtual exchange and facilitation for the past 10 years.

Soliya's flagship program is the Connect Program through which university students in the Middle East, North Africa, Asia, Europe, and the United States are connected via Soliya's custom designed video conferencing application. Every semester several 100 students enroll through accredited courses at participating universities and meet for weekly two hour sessions in multicultural groups guided by trained facilitators. Students engage in intensive discussion on a wide variety of topics including the relationship between the West and Arab & Muslim World, role of women in society, role of religion in politics, media, and so forth. They share the knowledge gained in their respective classes and participate in a variety of activities and conversations intended to complement their academic learning and develop a deeper understanding of different perspectives. To date, the Connect Program has been integrated into over 100 universities in 30 countries.

The Facilitation and Online Conflict Resolution Training offers the unique opportunity to learn conflict resolution and prevention, facilitation concepts and techniques applicable in a variety of settings, and experience the challenges and advantages of online facilitation. Each year 250- 300 graduate students and professionals enroll in the training. Participants meet with their training groups for two-hour weekly training sessions for a period of ten weeks, followed by 8 weeks of live practice facilitating groups in the Connect Program. Facilitators enable students to engage in deep, sustained, substantive dialogue on a variety of topics and empower them to discuss issues in the face of deep differences to foster better understanding and long lasting relationships.

For the past couple of years, Soliya has partnered with the Saxe Cognitive Neuroscience Lab at MIT to scientifically measure the impact of the Connect Program. The research is based on surveys administered among Soliya participants and matched university students control groups, before and after the Connect Program. The Connect Program has demonstrated significant increases in participants' commitment to cooperative and compassionate approaches to difference and their proficiency with 21st Century skills such as critical thinking and cross-cultural communication & collaboration.

