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# COMMENTING ACROSS DIFFERENCE: YOUTH DIALOGUE IN AN INTERCULTURAL VIRTUAL EXCHANGE PROGRAM

Alyssa Kreikemeier & Carrie James

**Abstract:** *The promise of online dialogue for building cosmopolitan sensibilities in youth has driven the rise of educational programs that leverage digital media for intercultural virtual exchange. While a growing body of research documents the role digital media play in young people’s lives, relatively few studies have examined how young people dialogue in diverse online spaces and what they learn as a result. We present findings from an exploratory qualitative-dominant mixed-methods study of how youth in one online program dialogued with their peers. Our dataset included online posts and comment threads, survey data, and selected interviews. Three themes emerged from our analysis: evidence of youth identity exploration, signs of global competence and cosmopolitanism, and enhanced digital communication skills. This study suggests that intercultural virtual exchange programs offer valuable opportunities for youth in these areas, yet also cautions of risks. We discuss the study’s limitations, further research questions, and implications with an emphasis on specific supports and design features needed to meet the promise such online experiences offer for dialogue across difference.*

**Keywords:** youth media, intercultural exchange, global education, online dialogue, cosmopolitanism, global competence, digital literacy

## Introduction

One promise of the internet is its potential to expose people to diverse perspectives. Ideally, such exposure supports global competence and cosmopolitanism — an approach to the world characterized by authentic curiosity about, respect for, and even love of difference (Boix-Mansilla & Jackson, 2011; Hansen, 2011). Yet, such promises often go unmet. At times, violent disagreements or cyberbullying color online encounters. Perhaps more frequently, homophily prevails; people “flock together,” engaging with like-minded others on social media (Pariser, 2012; Zuckerman, 2013).

Increasingly, educational initiatives seek to counter such patterns, connecting young people across the world for “intercultural virtual exchange” experiences. Programs like iEarn and Global Nomads leverage digital media to foster perspective-taking, intercultural understanding, and empathy. Such initiatives raise several important questions: *How do youth in these programs take up opportunities for intercultural online exchange? How do they dialogue with one another in these contexts? What do they appear to take away from their exchanges?*

This paper explores these questions through an analysis of dialogue in a global online learning community. First, we situate our study against literature on global competence,

cosmopolitanism, dialogue, and youth online participation. We then describe our study context and methods. Next, we report findings related to the dialogue moves youth made in the online community, and share reported takeaways. Together, these data illustrate how youth are expressing their identities, making connections and inquiring about others' lives, and developing online dialogue strategies.

## Competences for an interconnected world

Given the flow of ideas, people, and material goods across the globe, related political alliances and tensions, and digital connectivity, there is a growing emphasis on educating for global and intercultural competence. Boix-Mansilla and Jackson define global competence as “the capacity and inclination to understand and act on issues of global significance” (2011, xi). Their framework suggests that dialogue affords the foundational competences of “communicating ideas to diverse audiences” and “recognizing one’s own and others’ perspectives.” Deardorff’s conception of intercultural competence emphasizes the inclination to reach out beyond the self; “a choice that is made to intentionally explore the unknown...a process of continual learning, of being curious about the unknown” and “going beyond our own voice and situating our identity within a broader context” (Deardorff, 2012, p.8). These conceptions hint at the centrality of dialogue while highlighting the role of agency (choice and inclination) in intercultural competence. Further, while the term “competence” can signal a skill mastered once and for all, Deardorff (2012) defines it as an ongoing process.

Intercultural competence shares affinities with the concept of cosmopolitanism. While “openness to the world” is a common feature, definitions of cosmopolitanism vary across disciplines (Ong, 2009, 454). According to Appiah (2006), cosmopolitanism is an ethical stance that approaches difference with an open, appreciating disposition. Importantly, this disposition is “rooted” both in a particular place (Appiah, 2010) and in “everyday” routines and interactions with others (Ong, 2009). Similarly, Hansen (2010) depicts cosmopolitanism as “a reflective loyalty to the known” or local in balance with an obligation to inquire about others.

Both intercultural competence and cosmopolitanism involve recognizing one’s own perspectives while exploring others’. Reflective exchange across difference is a key practice here (Hansen, 2010). Dialogue, as conceptualized by Buber (2000) and Bakhtin (1981), is synergistic with these ideas, and stresses mutuality; authenticity in one’s own disclosures; respect for the uniqueness and wholeness of others; and a “turning toward” the other (i.e., listening). Participants’ socio-cultural identities and worldviews are always present in dialogic encounters, which require an openness to accommodating others’ perspectives (Bakhtin, 1981) aligning with cosmopolitanism.

This literature thus helpfully points to dialogic features and dispositions global educational programs should strive to support. Yet, the extent to which they can be nurtured and achieved in *online* intercultural encounters is not well understood.

## Online opportunities and challenges

Online spaces offer exciting affordances for connection and dialogue across difference (Parham & Allen, 2015; Rheingold, 200; Turner, 2006), especially given digital media’s appeal to youth. Since the early 2000s, some have referred to youth as “digital natives,” (Palfrey & Gasser, 2010; Prensky, 2001). Although this terminology has been problematized to

acknowledge inequities in digital access and supports (Ito et al., 2013), recent data indicate frequent if not “constant” youth engagement in online activities (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; Unicef, 2017).

Opportunities to give voice to one’s ideas and exchange perspectives with others have long been understood to support adolescent identity development (Erikson, 1968), civic development (Flanagan & Faison, 2001; Younnis, 2011), and perspective-taking (Black, 2008). Digital technologies and online spaces are now implicated in these key developmental tasks. Studies indicate that social media use can support identity exploration and expression (Davis, 2010; Davis & Weinstein, 2017; Turkle, 1995), peer relationships and intimacy (boyd, 2014; Gardner and Davis, 2013), and positive connections around shared struggles and/or interests (Ito, et al., 2010; Jenkins et al., 2006). Online spaces also offer venues for youth civic participation, voice, and dialogue (James, Gruner, Lee, & Mullen, 2016; Kahne, Middaugh & Allen, 2015).

Online ties are often rooted in offline relationships (Reich et al., 2012). Yet, the global reach of the internet can connect people from different cultures and/or living in distant places and, in doing so, offer the potential for developing cosmopolitan sensibilities (Zuckerman, 2014). Hull et. al. (2010)’s study of one online educational community showed that such initiatives can support communication across difference and cosmopolitan attitudes. They observed intercultural triggers – interactions “that jumpstart, at times in dramatic fashion, cross-cultural communication” (Hull et al., 2010, 354) – and “everyday cosmopolitanism” or routine gestures of inquiry and exchange (Corpus Ong, 2009).

Yet, further research is needed, especially given challenges inherent to online communication. Dynamics of exchanges are shaped by reliance on text and the absence of facial and verbal cues that indicate tone. Therefore, online, noted dialogic qualities, including “listening,” must be explicit and visible. Social media conversations can also devolve into ugly disagreements or shouting matches that discourage further participation (James, 2014). Other challenges to achieving the internet’s cosmopolitan potentials lie in “like meets like” patterns often reproduced online. Tendencies to flock together can lead to filter bubbles or echo chambers that narrow rather than broaden exposure to different perspectives (Parisier, 2012; Sunstein, 2017; Zuckerman, 2014).

Given this context, educational efforts to promote intercultural competence and online dialogue have added importance. Intercultural virtual exchange is an emerging field with the growth of programs like iEarn, Global Nomads, and Global Cities. While some research has explored intercultural capacities developed through virtual worlds (Diehl & Prins, 2008) and online language learning (O’Dowd, R., 2007), relatively little is known about the dynamics and outcomes of such experiences, especially for K-12 students. Çiftçi’s (2016) synthesis of intercultural exchange studies concludes that most research has focused on language learning outcomes among college-aged participants, and notes gaps in understandings of how participants dialogue in these spaces and related outcomes.

This study aims to address such gaps by examining data from Out of Eden Learn, an intercultural virtual exchange program that emphasizes thoughtful dialogue. Our research questions are:

- How do youth dialogue with one another in this intercultural online learning program? What kinds of dialogue strategies do they use in comment threads? How

do they respond to curricular- and platform-based prompts suggesting specific dialogue moves?


- What does the dialogue content suggest about the insights and attitudes youth may take away from such experiences?<sup>1</sup>
- What do youth in this program report that they learn from dialoguing with youth from different cultures and backgrounds?<sup>2</sup>


## The current study


This study is based on data from an online community, Out of Eden Learn (OOEL). OOEL is a social-media platform that connects school-aged students around the world. Guided by the program's curriculum, participants engage in offline activities, including exploring local neighborhoods, documenting their everyday lives, and identifying local-global connections. Each online learning group is curated to connect similar-aged students from different geographic, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds. For safety, the platform is password-protected, pseudonymous, and prohibits posting identifiable information or photos of students. Supported by an educator, participants post documentation from curricular activities and comment on other students' work.


The program includes a dialogue toolkit designed to support thoughtful commenting. The toolkit starts from the premise that an online comment is an action (Austin, 1962), which includes a set of discrete, "functional moves" (Paulus, 2006) significant in and of themselves and also meaningful for their content. Accordingly, the toolkit is a set of conversations "moves" participants are encouraged to use. The specific moves — and icons representing each move — are displayed in the image below.


These moves build on "thinking routines" research and practice which emphasizes lean structures that scaffold particular modes of thinking (e.g., connect, extend) (James & Sloan, 2014; Richhart et al., 2011) aligning with dialogic features of authenticity, respectful inquiry, "turning toward the other" (Buber, 2000; Bahktin, 1981) and with research suggesting the value of dialogue aimed at "connection" over argumentation (Paulus, 2006).


 **Appreciate**: Share what you like, appreciate or value in the post you've read. Be specific.

 **Probe**: Probe for more details. Ask questions that will help give you a better sense of another person's perspective. (See Creative Questions & Sentence Starts below)

 **Snip**: Cut and paste a phrase or sentence from the original post into your comment. Ask a question about it or say what you find interesting or important about what is being said.

 **Reflect back**: Say what you think you're hearing. "What I hear you saying is... Is that what you're trying to say?" The goal here is to confirm your understanding of what is being communicated or to "get on the same page."

 **Connect**: Make a connection between something in the post and your own experiences, feelings, or interests.

 **Extend**: Describe how the post extended your thoughts in new directions or gave you a new perspective.

The dialogue toolkit and related curricular instructions are notable features of the program. In the spirit of design-based research, OOEL explores impacts of particular design features while aiming to contribute to broader understandings about intercultural learning and exchange (Barab & Squire, 2004).

## Methods

Using a qualitative-dominant mixed methods analysis (Johnson, R., et al, 2007) and thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006), a two-person research team examined two datasets: posts and comment threads from one online learning group and post-surveys of a larger group of participants. We also examined supplemental data from interviews with students in the online group.

First, we analyzed responses to a post-survey, focusing on the open-ended question, “*What have you learned from interacting with other young people in your learning group?*” We examined a selection of responses following an emic and iterative approach to surface key themes which included: learning about online peers’ cultures and lives, gaining new perspective on participants’ own locales, and gaining online communication strategies. We then thematically coded responses from 421 students ages 8-19 who participated in 2014-2015 and quantitized (calculated frequencies of) the codes.

Second, we selected posts and comments from one OOEL learning group,<sup>3</sup> which included students ages 13-19 in classrooms in Erbil, Iraq; Beaverton, Oregon, US; Vancouver, Canada; and Washington DC, US. We examined posts from one activity, *Taking a Neighborhood Walk*, and narrowed our dataset to original posts with comment(s) (32/57) for a total of 121 posts.<sup>4</sup>

In the tradition of thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006), which has been used in other qualitative studies of online posts (Ure et al., 2017), we undertook an emic approach to initially code selected posts and surface key themes. We observed organic dialogue moves – including personal identity expression; emotional expression; cultural difference statements; sharing personal or community information; storytelling; assuming shared knowledge; and interpreting the meaning of an online peer’s post – in addition to dialogue toolkit moves (e.g., appreciate, probe). We constructed codes in an iterative fashion, examining additional data, applying the initial codebook, discussing disagreements among coders, and refining code definitions accordingly. We then conducted line-by-line coding of posts, maintaining intercoder reliability through shadow coding and discussion to resolve any disagreements.

Finally, loosely guided by themes surfaced in our post-survey and dialogue coding, we examined supplemental data from interviews with a handful of students in this online learning group. We noted key themes and self-reported takeaways, and compared sections of the interviews where youth talked about specific dialogue threads with our coding.

## Findings

We discuss our findings through three themes that emerged: the use of online dialogue to explore and express identity, for developing global competence and cosmopolitanism, and

for learning online communication skills. Moments of interaction between the first two themes can be identified — such as connecting with another user through sharing part of one’s own life — and some aspects of identity expression can build a foundation for cosmopolitan practice. Yet, there are also worthwhile distinctions between how dialogue serves identity expression and how it supports global competences and cosmopolitanism. For each theme, we first describe findings from our analysis of online dialogue. Then, we describe related findings from surveys and supplemental interviews.

Table 1. Indicates, defines, and reports the prevalence of the specific dialogue moves observed in our sample of posts and comments.

<b>MOVE</b>	<b>FREQUENCY</b> (number of posts in which move is present)
<b>*Appreciation:</b> Sharing praise and/or expressing what one likes, appreciates or values.	77/153 (50%)
<b>Information/Context Sharing:</b> Sharing information about one’s personal life, context (culture, history, etc.), or environmental surroundings.	67/153 (44%)
<b>*Questions:</b> Posing questions to other students, probing for details/information.	35/153 (23%)
<b>*Connections:</b> Stating a connection/similarity between something shared by another student and one’s own experiences, context, values, feelings or interests.	30/153 (20%)
<b>*Extensions:</b> Stating how an experience or another student’s post extended or pushed one’s thinking in a new direction or offered a different perspective.	32/153 (20%)
<b>Personal Identity/Beliefs/Values Expression:</b> Expressing personal interests, beliefs, values, or other aspects of identity.	24/153 (16%)
<b>Audience Sensitivity:</b> Indicating awareness of one’s audience by making a direct statement to readers or referencing prior ideas mentioned in other students’ posts.	25/153 (16%)
<b>Difference Statements:</b> Stating a perceived difference between one’s own experiences, beliefs, context, culture and that of others.	18/153 (12%)
<b>Emotional expression:</b> Sharing emotions such as joy, sadness, loneliness, etc.	18/153 (12%)
<b>Internet speak:</b> Use of emoji’s, slang, shorthand, capital letters or excessive punctuation to indicate tone.	11/153 (7%)
<b>*Reflect back efforts:</b> Comments or questions that check for understanding or ensure that one is interpreting another’s comments correctly.	6/153 (4%)
<b>*Snips:</b> Quoting from another student’s post as part of one’s own comment.	6/153 (4%)

**Table 1. All dialogue moves frequency**  
*\* indicates moves in the program’s dialogue toolkit.*

Below, we focus on moves most pertinent to core themes of the paper. Although we identify some as salient markers of cosmopolitanism and others as vehicles of identity expression, we acknowledge that some dialogue moves could be leveraged in service of either or both. Moves related to online communication skills occur across these themes.

## Youth identity exploration

This study revealed specific ways in which *online* dialogue supports identity exploration and social-emotional skills. Youth employed relevant dialogue moves including: *sharing information* about self or context; *personal identity expression*; and *connecting* with other youth by identifying shared experiences, beliefs and perspectives. These core expressive moves were often enriched through *explaining or elaborating* with details, adding *emotional expressions*, *appreciating* online peers' posts, and describing how their thoughts were *extended* in new directions through an exchange.

One of the most prevalent dialogue moves — appearing in 44% of posts and comments — was *sharing personal or contextual information*. Given the pseudonymous context, the ostensibly simple move of *sharing information* about one's setting offered a crucial base for subsequent, and seemingly meaningful, exchanges. For example, one youth shared a photo of their local train system explaining, "I ride the max every day to get to and from school, and also to other places since I don't drive. Does Erbil and Canada have a trimet (public transportation) system like this?" A Canada-based student responded, "I am from Canada and we have skytrains and buses in our public transportation system. I take the skytrain very often." While details about commuting patterns are in some ways unremarkable, they offer important glimpses into youths' everyday lives, which can trigger awareness of connections and points of difference.

In other threads, youth shared features of their natural environments. For example, "I really love your photos, especially the first one! In Vancouver we can get some pretty crazy weather as well, and you can also see the rain clouds moving in. I love nature too and sometimes I have to stop and look around at all the views that I sometimes miss." Here, the student *appreciated* another student's post before *sharing information* about their own context and *connecting* by identifying similarities.

In another example, an Iraq-based student responded to an online peer's question about their photo, elaborating, "The car's type is called Opel, it used to be famous in the 80's here in Iraq but since the cars are developing its like extinct now adays but some still have it." Here, the youth provided historical context, information which otherwise might not be available to online peers in other countries. By *sharing information*, youth offered more material to discuss — a move that corresponded with richer substantive dialogue overall. Such dialogue included a prevalence of *difference statements*, *connections*, and *elaborations or explanations* of students' personal lives or communities.

*Sharing personal or contextual information* was often a starting point for other dialogue moves, including connections, differences statements, and sometimes emotional expression and *internet speak*. In one example, a youth made a connection with a photo posted by an Iraq-based peer playing a game:



When I was young I use to play the same game, my cousins and I use to play it differently. We would get a rock through it and jump through the squares with one leg. The goal was to jump over the square that the rock was on. It's cool to know you play that game to when you were young ! (:

After making an initial *connection* (“I use to play the same game”), the commenter *shared information* about their own life and context, indicated a difference, and invited further dialogue. In these ways, connections and differences statements are part of youths’ own identity expressions *and* exploration of others’ lives that are essential starting points for global competence or cosmopolitanism.

We also observed use of emoticons (e.g., (:) to insert tone, which can strengthen rapport. An Iraq-based student used *internet speak* as well as *emotional expression* to add emphasis in their conversation about teen parenting:

Yes it’s really huge responsibility! It’s really nice and helpful to have parenting class in your school I loved the idea a lot because maybe some teens will need this. THANKS FOR YOUR TIME! AND MAY GOD BE WITH YOU!!!!

Capitalization and punctuation added depth and enthusiasm to this comment. As discussed below, it is noteworthy that students incorporated such features to compensate for the lack of affectual properties in online dialogue.

As part of *sharing information* about their lives, some students explicitly conveyed aspects of their personal identities, beliefs and/or values. Such *identity expressions* appeared in 16% of posts. One US-based youth posted, “Yes...it [sic] funny how life is... because 5 years ago I had no direction. I'm proud to be in a masonic youth group and devote my time to my community.” In this remark, the student shared a salient aspect of their identity, a related sense of pride, and a belief in contributing to their community.

Other participants *expressed personal identities* and values after noticing and indicating *connections* with peers’ expressions. One Canada-based youth commented, “Christmas is a big deal in my family too, it's my favourite holiday because everyone gets together and appreciates all the wonderful things we have and how lucky we are to be together as a family.” Another youth shared, “I really like people who care for there [sic] environment, they show that they are responsible and caring. When people are caring, they are saving many organisms and plants life.” In the latter example, the student stated a deeply held value. Indicating their admiration for environmental stewardship, the student shared an aspect of their identity. Youth also expressed shared beliefs or perspectives, connecting their own values with those of online peers, such as “I also think that having a clean city or neighborhood always gives a good impression to other people.”

Finally, in 20% of posts and comments, youth expressed how other students’ posts *extended* their thinking about their own identities and communities and those of their online peers. Alongside their photos and neighborhood walk descriptions, some youth shared new understandings of their surroundings. A US-based student explained “... I chose this picture to share the knowledge about something that is very important in my life. Also to show the connection to my life and the community that surrounds me. On this walk I looked at the Beaverton temple with a new set of eyes.” In such reflections, students *shared information*, *expressed personal identities* (“I chose this picture to share the knowledge about something that is very important in my life”), and indicated perspectives gained (“a new set of eyes”). In

doing so, youth gestured toward “rooted cosmopolitanism” (Hansen, 2011) and shared information that stimulated further dialogue with online peers.

Also notable were *extensions* that youth indicated in responses to online peers’ posts. After reading a neighborhood walk post of an Iraqi-based student, a US-based peer commented:

this is interesting, because we don't have those kind of side walks. And we don't really have plants in the middle of the sidewalk its usually off to the side in the grass or dirt, but theres not much dirt its mainly grass and trees. there a few plant on the side walks. and we have this one big school thats an all girls school with nuns but thats the only place i have heard there were nuns. other than that i haven't seen one since i was little at church.

In another example, a Canada-based student indicated how another student’s post had given them a new perspective on the everyday: “In your description, you mentioned that it captures the routine of the everyday, but I think it does so in a very surreal way that severs the routine and makes it more objective. It’s quite beautiful, actually; like a memory.”

In post-surveys, youths’ takeaways support our observations that online dialogue afforded opportunities for self-exploration, expression, and new perspectives. Participants reported that the program gave them new insights into themselves and their communities. One participant wrote, “From my [online learning group], I have learned that my daily life, although it seems boring to me, could be quite unique and interesting to other people from around the world.” Another youth shared insights sparked by an activity: “When we did the...activity where we had to talk to our neighbors about past experience with how many times they moved, why they like this area, etc... I really enjoyed doing that activity because it made me interact with my neighbor more...” This reflection connects with a common theme we observed in participants’ posts: taking a slow walk through their neighborhoods shifted the way they relate to their daily context. Exploring the local alongside learning about others allowed youth to deepen and express their relationship to their own communities and identities. Despite these takeaways, a small minority reported not enjoying the program due to infrequent interactions with students in their learning group and/or not receiving comments on their posts.

Additionally, youth sometimes coupled takeaways about their own identities and contexts with broader statements about the identities, lives, and experiences of others; for example, “I have learned that we are very alike.” While collapsing or minimizing important differences is potentially problematic, these reflections taken alongside youth’s insights into their own communities indicate at least hints of a developing cosmopolitan sensibility that engages the local while considering the global (Corpus Ong, 2009; Hansen, 2011; Hull et al., 2010).

## **Signs of global competence and cosmopolitanism**

Our analysis of Out of Eden Learn dialogue indicated that participants may be developing cosmopolitan orientations, or at least practicing dialogue skills identified by global competence frameworks. Here we focus on how youth deployed conversation moves such as *appreciating*, *connecting*, *questioning*, *extending*, and *noticing similarities and differences*. Certain exchanges indicate the presence of cosmopolitan sensibilities while others come up short, indicating potential challenges for these programs.

Across comment threads, *appreciations* were the most common dialogue move and often appeared as follows: “I like that your parents worked hard to reach their goal and build a nice house.” Frequently, appreciations were coupled with additional moves, such as *connecting*, that deepened the exchange. For instance, “I like how this picture for some reason reminds me of my childhood memories, it seems like a place to play and run... It looks like some neighborhoods here in Oregon. There is a lot more in common than what I thought.” This connection involved sharing a memory, connecting the photo to the commenter’s own context, and then moving to a broader reflection about commonalities despite differences.

Students made *connections* to build conversation and name perceived similarities. At times, students made broad statements about points of connection, such as, “I like your photos and i agree with you when you said we ALL have similarities and that we are not different from one another :)” Another youth commented, “I love the view. That reminds me of home (Oregon). Our viewpoints are very similar and it's perfect.” In another example, a youth used the *connect* move to indicate a similarity and then posed a *question* to continue the conversation: “I love spending time admiring the nature in my neighbourhood too! What other kinds of animals live near your area?”

*Questioning* was a move employed to deepen conversation. In another example, a participant posed several *questions*, responding to various parts of another youth’s post and making a *connection*: “What do these companies do? and since you say you have your school in your neighborhood, does that mean you walk to your school? My school is also in my neighborhood, it is somewhat nice getting to walk to my school everyday.” Finally, in one exchange an Iraq-based youth used a *question* to understand how an experience felt for a US-based peer. The US-based student replied with a *probe* to continue the conversation:

**Student1:** Amazing, how were you feeling since it was your first time walking into a forest? We have forests here in Iraq but people are scared to [go] in there, except the ones who hunt animals just as Falcons and gazelle.

**Student2:** it was pretty and i felt calm, how come people are scared to go in the forests?

In their comments and posts, youth made meta *statements about differences and similarities* they noticed when ‘listening’ to other youth. Participants commented on similarities by identifying shared interests, noticing similar environmental features, and sharing memories. Such *connections* were sometimes stated in comments that were unrelated to the original post such as one Iraq-based student’s comment, “Which type of book you like and enjoy reading? THANK YOU!” Other times students noticed shared interests such as, “I also used to play the same game when i was younger.” The *similarities* noted across environments tended to be directly related to the original posts students shared. One US-based student noticed both a similar perspective and shared approach in an Iraq-based student’s post: “I like the way you took the pictures, and how the view is! I took similar pictures as yours of the views of Oregon but these pictures are amazing!” Another US-based student focused on the sidewalks visible in a photo shared by an Iraq-based student, noticing, “I like the brick side walk because that’s how it is in my country (Peru) they still make those kind of side walks.” Finally, youth reached beyond the visible in one another’s posts to recognize shared memories as in, “This garden looks really beautiful. I also have memories in gardens as a child but they look completely different.” Here, the young person drew a similarity from the *connection* they noticed, while also gesturing toward subtle *differences*.

We observed more explicit *difference statements* in three areas: differences in possessions or resources, experiences, and features of their surroundings. In one post, an Iraq-based student shared a photo of a generator, explaining “here our power is very poor that’s why we use generators.” A US-based student responded, “Wow! This is so much different from the US. We never have the power out unless it is like a rain or wind storm.” Participants also noticed differences in experiences. One youth replied to a photo of a street in Ankawa, Iraq, “What do you remember of old ankawa when you see this street? But that’s pretty interesting, because we normally don’t see places like this.” Here, the youth expressed interest in the post and used a *question* to learn more about the poster’s experience before noting a *difference* (“we normally don’t see places like this”).

Finally, youth noticed differences in their surroundings such as, “This is really interesting to me because i’m from Beaverton Oregon and we don’t see buildings like this, because it rains a lot here.” The types of differences and similarities students noticed illustrate what dialoguing across difference can look like among youth. It bears mention that in making difference statements, youth might convey what appears to be pity or condescension. Although not explicit in this dataset, the dialogue above offers an example of an exchange that could engender pity and/or shame. Further research might illuminate the conditions under which recognizing difference leads to respectful engagement versus feelings of superiority or inferiority. Nonetheless, the prevalence of appreciations and connections youth made also suggest that virtual exchange can support the development and practice of cosmopolitan sensibilities.

We noted efforts by youth to explicitly name the intentions behind their posts and comments, indicating they were considering their readers while posting. For example, youth made statements that indicated *audience awareness or sensitivity*, such as, “Hi thanks for everyone who comment on my pictures...” Audience sensitivity also included affirmations of prior comments, such as, “I know right. . .” Participants’ awareness of the specificity of the online dialogue context resonates with self-reported takeaways about learning to communicate online.

In post-surveys, youth confirmed our interpretation that their exchanges were sites of learning about cultures that were new or unfamiliar to them. One participant shared, “I learn what it is like and what it actually looks like in other parts of the world. Also I got the hear, see and interact with other people on the other sides of the globe. I learned how other people look at the world.” Many youth pointed to unexpected similarities and/or differences between their own lives and those of their online peers: “I have learned that people can see the same thing differently and have different thoughts.” While this example points to nuanced ways in which participants acknowledged similarities and differences, we noted a spectrum ranging from detailed and nuanced to broader takeaways, like “the world is diverse/interesting” and “everyone has a story to tell.”

Interviews with selected students in the group we examined confirmed that learning about young people in different contexts is a primary outcome. As one teen said, “I feel like the most important thing that I learned was that a lot of the time we think that we’re so unique that everyone else is so different from us. But you really get to see how we all have similarities and we can connect with everyone else.” When asked how these connections feel, they replied, “I feel that... it kind of built [like] a bond. You understand that a lot of people are the same and that some may have a different values but we’re all good human beings.” [p.3]

We also saw evidence of perspective taking, which DeBernardis, et al. (2014) defines as an individual's awareness of states in both oneself and in others and the ability to infer another's thoughts, feelings, or other internal states. For example, when asked if interacting with other students impacted their life in any way, one student replied "I think so, because now I notice that things are not always there for everyone, and to always appreciate what you have, because not everyone goes through the same things as you do.... Well, just basically not to take things for granted and to appreciate what you have...." While the outcome of seeing one's self and context differently offers the potential for developing global competence, the same awareness could lead to a simplified "single story" (Adichie, 2009) of an entire population or region.

Echoing the noted identity exploration findings, some youth spoke about sharing aspects of one's life as a stimulus for learning about others. An Iraq-based youth discussed their desire to share something unique in the photo they posted from their neighborhood walk. The student explained that they chose the subject of their photo — a nun walking down the street — assuming peers from other places wouldn't be familiar with the sight. Considering which image to share from their daily life prompted this youth to imagine which taken-for-granted aspects of life might surprise others. In another interview, an Iraq-based student reported learning about others' societies, referencing a personal story shared by a US-based student. In this case, the student didn't comment on the story in the online platform but had been impacted enough by reading it that they recalled it as a key learning moment.

## Developing communication skills for a connected world

Our analysis of youths' exchanges — and the specific moves they used to share their identities and inquire about peers' lives — suggest that they were also developing critical skills around *how* to engage with others online. The program's dialogue toolkit is designed to support specific commenting strategies. The extent to which youth employ those strategies is important to understand, but also the strategies they use, unprompted, to enrich their exchanges, communicate tone and emotions, and signal that they are "listening" to one another's perspectives. Below are selected examples of comments that indicate developing skills in the *how* of online communication. Youths' comments included emojis, textual expression of emotions, affirming statements, and strategies indicating awareness of their audience.

The "tone-challenged" nature of digital contexts (James, 2014) drives the use of emojis, emoticons, and other forms of "internet speech." Returning to a quote discussed above, a US-based student noted a connection with an Iraq-based student in having played a similar childhood game. "It's cool to know you play that game to when you were young ! (:)" The concluding emoticon (:, and the exclamation point, convey excitement and happiness at having noticed this similarity. Another student responded, "Woooooow I really like that. Although the ways we play the game are different but am happy that we share the same game." The use of multiple o's in "Woooooow" reveals an effort to add emotional weight to the exchange.

Another Iraq-based student frequently used capitalization and exclamation points to conclude comments. For example, "Hi I like reading books a lot, like adventure, fantasy, science fiction, short stories and novels. Which type of book you like and enjoy reading? THANK YOU!" In these ways, emoticons, punctuation, capitalization, and internet slang help to indicate tone and reduce the risk of misinterpretation. Youth used emoticons and emojis relatively infrequently — a surprising finding given widespread use among youth in

general in text messaging and social media apps. The educational context of the virtual exchange program may have inhibited their use. Some youth may have compensated by leaning on emotional expression via the written word, as observed in 12% of posts. The use of words like “cool,” “I love this” or “amazing” indicate the emotional valence or weight of youths’ reactions to one another’s posts.

Youth also indicated *audience sensitivity* by using phrases that indicate agreement or affirmation such as, “I know right. . .” or “Exactly!” or by acknowledging prior comments: “Hi thanks for everyone who comment on my pictures...” They also displayed audience sensitivity at the outset of their posts by including cues about what they hoped other youth — their readers — would grasp or understand. Youth often used phrases like, “I would like you guys to know...” or “What I want you to understand...” to indicate desired takeaways. Some youth sought explicitly to debunk misconceptions or stereotypes about their contexts. One student wrote, “I posted this photo because it is beautiful and, it was raining the entire day before this little bit of heaven poked through the clouds...Vancouver is known for being rainy and cloudy but hopefully this will break through that stigma and, people will realise that it is acutally [sic] a really beautiful city.” These examples suggest that youth grasp the potentials for misinterpretation online and the need to be explicit about intended meanings.

In post-surveys, youth indicated that the program supported communication skills including how to ask questions, notice and call out details, share ideas respectfully, and “respond thoughtfully.” One youth reported, “I have learned how to respond to people, and how to have manners on an online scenario.” Another referenced the importance of “listening” through careful reading, “[I learned] that you have to read their posts carefully a couple times so you can comment thoughtfully.” The art of questioning was another cited skill: “I have learned that it is better to ask people questions that aren't yes or no questions because you get a more specific answer and then you can know how they feel or felt.” One student indicated that the dialogue toolkit supported skill development: “I have learned some of the ways to make your comments more interesting instead of just saying good job you can ‘Snip’ which means take something that they said in their post and use that to add more interesting detail, you also should ask conversation starters questions and a lot of other things too!” Another youth wrote, “This is really a good chance to learn how to communicate and cooperate with others.”

## Discussion

At a time when educational demands for global competence, dialogue across difference, and digital literacies are on the rise, this study offers valuable insights, indicates the merits of future research, and suggests implications for further educational supports for intercultural exchange.

Analyses of participants’ online dialogue and post-survey reflections indicated emerging intercultural competences and cosmopolitan orientations. In interviews, youth highlighted learning about other people and cultures as a primary takeaway, corroborating self-reported survey data. In online exchanges, participants engaged with peers from different backgrounds in sensitive, thoughtful ways. Their dialogue moves — indicating connections, making difference and similarities statements, posing questions — and largely respectful tone, arguably amount to everyday, “rooted” acts of cosmopolitanism (Appiah, 2010; Hansen, 2010; Ong, 2009). In their polite yet authentic questions, appreciations, and

observations, participants indicated a genuine desire to “turn toward” (Buber, 2000) and explore other young people’s worlds and perspectives. Such dialogic moves are key markers of global or intercultural competence (Boix-Mansilla & Jackson, 2011; Deardorff, 2012). Yet, we also observed potentially problematic findings in online posts and survey responses suggesting collapse of meaningful differences and limited awareness of inequalities. While such concerns may be attributable to the tone-challenged nature of online communication and/or language differences, risks of stereotyping and ethnocentric superiority exist in these contexts.

While engaging with people and cultures less familiar to them, participants also reflected on their own local contexts and identities. In part, these reflections were triggered by curricular activities. Yet, they also were apparent in dialogue that involved enthusiastic information sharing about their personal lives, values, interests, and communities. Such identity expressions cohere with other research indicating that online contexts can positively support adolescent identity exploration (Davis, 2010; Davis & Weinstein, 2017). For adolescents, composing posts and comments for an authentic audience of similar-aged peers from different backgrounds may uniquely support new insights about themselves and their emerging identities. Unfolding in a pseudonymous context where the “selfies,” pressures to project a polished image (Gardner & Davis, 2013) and risks of “context collapse” (boyd, 2014) are absent or unlikely may further enrich self-reflection and exploration.

This study also found self-reported gains in participants’ digital communication skills. In post-surveys and interviews, some participants reported new insights about and skills for online dialogue. In addition to the dialogue moves youth practiced online – including organic moves as well as those prompted by the program – their post-survey responses explicitly stated that the dialogue toolkit enhanced digital communication skills. Other research suggests strategies for online participation are often learned by “doing” – i.e., by engaging in online forums with informal but distinct discussion norms (Ito et al., 2010). Yet, studies also document a need for direct, formal supports and practice for online dialogue (James et al., 2016; Hodgins, 2017).

Our findings have important implications for educators and program design. Intercultural competence studies find that supports are needed for participants to move beyond exchange toward developing global competence (Ciftci, 2016). This study suggests the positive potential of programs that encourage simultaneous local and global inquiry and provide explicit dialogue supports for visible listening, inquiry, and sharing. Supports for navigating concerning or offensive comments are also warranted. While intercultural understanding and appreciation are intended outcomes of educational programs, this study revealed moments where youth collapsed important differences as they reached toward connection. Bringing youth together from different backgrounds can magnify perceived differences and spark pity or condescension as awareness of inequalities emerge. Thus, while online contexts offer promising opportunities for “bridging” and “bonding,” capacities for expressing perspectives sensitively, carefully interpreting dialogue, and productively responding to offensive remarks (Parham & Allen, 2015) must also be intentionally supported. Considering capacities at different developmental stages is important here.

## **Conclusion**

This study contributes important insights about the potential of virtual exchange programs for supporting vital skills and dispositions for our complex, interconnected world. Our findings suggest that online intercultural programs that invite and support dialogue across

difference foster identity expression and exploration (Davis & Weinstein, 2017), cosmopolitan practice (Hull et al., 2010; O’Dowd, 2007), and communication skills.

The current study looked at a specific program, Out of Eden Learn, which limits its generalizability. The majority of students participated through a classroom setting with an educator’s oversight and the educational context of participation may explain the low prevalence of internet speak and minimal negative encounters. OOEL’s custom-built platform is similar to commercial social media sites, yet youth cannot join without an adult guide and must participate pseudonomously. Further, the program’s curricular prompts and suggested dialogue moves emphasize inquiry, listening, and connecting which may have inhibited challenging dialogue moves. While the study reveals how youth explore their own and others’ everyday lives through dialogue emphasizing connection-making (Paulus, 2006), none of the dialogue involved discussions of *contentious* issues, which likely has distinct dynamics and impacts.

Questions for further research include: How do experiences in programs with explicit dialogue supports shape participants’ dialogue strategies in other online contexts? How does participation in intercultural online programs inform further intercultural inquiry beyond the program? How do such programs influence participating educators’ pedagogy, especially as it pertains to dialogue, teaching about other cultures, and online learning? To build on these initial findings, future research should include educator interviews, classroom case studies, in-depth participant interviews, and analysis of online dialogue about contentious topics.

Although this study explored one specific (and, in some respects, unique) program, its findings suggest curricular and design principles that have broader applicability. Particular promises lie in educational experiences that guide youth in sensitive inquiry into others’ lives while simultaneously exploring meaningful aspects of their own lives in ways that trace local-global connections.

Tools that nudge dialoguers to consider specific conversation moves — such as OOEL’s dialogue toolkit — and to be intentional in their commenting also have significant potential. Finally, dialogue skills for thoughtful sharing, visible listening, and connecting are foundational to build vital capacities for navigating challenging dialogue situations where different perspectives – or heated disagreements – arise.

This study contributes to scholarship in global education and online learning and suggests the value of thoughtfully designed digital exchange experiences. Supporting youth to navigate online spaces and engage in dialogue across difference is arguably urgent. Understanding how educational programs can meet this need and where they may come up short is essential. Insights from this study suggest a promising way forward.

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<sup>1</sup> This research question is largely etic. We coded the content and moves of youths' exchanges and interpreted them as indications of their attitudes.

<sup>2</sup> This research question is emic – grounded in youths' reported feelings and perspectives about their online dialogue experiences.

<sup>3</sup> When referring to participants, we use they/their to be inclusive with respect to gender identities.

<sup>4</sup> We use the term "post" to refer both to original posts and subsequent comments.