

The Soliya Connect Program:  
Two Institutions' Experience with Virtual Intercultural Communication

Steven Elliott-Gower  
Georgia College

Kenneth W. Hill  
Kennesaw State University

**Author Note**

Steven Elliott-Gower, Department of Political Science, Georgia College;  
Kenneth W. Hill, Global Strategic Initiatives and Department of Management,  
Kennesaw State University.

Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Steven  
Elliott-Gower, Associate Professor, Political Science, Georgia College, 215  
Terrell Hall, CBX 029, Milledgeville, GA 31061. Phone: (478) 445-1467. E-mail:  
[steve.elliott-gower@gcsu.edu](mailto:steve.elliott-gower@gcsu.edu)

**Abstract**

In 2012, Georgia College and Kennesaw State University partnered with Soliya, a Washington, DC-based non-profit organization, to bring their students a unique international education experience: the opportunity to engage “virtually” in dialogue, via video-conferencing technology, with students around the world about Islam and the relationship between Western countries and Muslim-majority countries. In this article, the authors compare their respective approaches, examining course objectives, student learning outcomes, course structure, students’ experience with Soliya, and student learning outcomes assessment. The authors conclude with some observations about Soliya and, by implication, other virtual international education experiences as alternatives and/or complements to traditional study-abroad programs in educating globally competent students and citizens.

*Keywords:* Virtual Exchange; Soliya; Student Learning

### **Soliya, Exchange 2.0, and the Connect Program**

Founded in 2003, Soliya is a Washington, DC-based “global nonprofit network” dedicated to resolving differences between the “West” and the “Muslim World” by improving understanding and shifting from a model of confrontation and coercion to a model of cooperation and compassion.

The first problem, as Soliya and many others see it, is that only a tiny percentage of U.S. students—for the most part socioeconomically privileged students—study abroad. Indeed, according to NAFSA: Association of International Educators, only about 1% of U.S. college students studied abroad in 2011-12; 76% of these were White; 53% studied in Europe; and 32% studied in either Italy, Spain, or the United Kingdom. A preponderance of these students (37%) participated in summer study-abroad programs. Also, while perhaps not an explicit concern of Soliya and its partners, two-thirds of U.S. study-abroad students are female (NAFSA, 2014; Institute of International Education, 2013).

Meaningful contact with local students during summer study-abroad programs is rare (mainly because those local students are not around during the summer), and few U.S. students manage to break out of their summer study-abroad “bubbles,” traveling with their American classmates and being taught primarily by their American professors. This can even be a problem in semester-long exchange programs when U.S. and other international students are clumped together in housing away from local students.

Moreover—and this is an explicit concern for Soliya—there is, in general, little assessment of student learning outcomes related to study-abroad experiences. Indeed, study-abroad programs seem to operate by a different, less rigorous set of rules than U.S. university-based courses and programs. One might call this set of problems the “Quadruple-A” problem: access, access, access, and assessment—that is, access to international education, access to international education programs beyond Western Europe (although they do, of course, exist), access to students from other countries and cultures, and good assessment of programs.

Soliya argues (and we agree) that the norm should be “for students to have a profound cross-cultural experience as part of their education, whether it is in person or online” in the 21st century (Soliya, 2014c). Enter “Exchange 2.0.” While not dismissing traditional international exchange programs, Soliya and others have been experimenting with a low-cost, high-impact “virtual exchange”

model, with virtual exchange defined as “technology-enabled, facilitated, and embedded in curricula with a cross-cultural educational purpose” (Soliya, 2014a) and “technology-enabled, sustained, people-to-people education programs” (Exchange 2.0, 2014). Proponents of this model argue that “the next generation of Exchange 2.0 initiatives . . . will improve the number, diversity, and experience of international exchange participants” (Himelfarb and Idriss, 2011). We will return to the value of virtual exchange as an alternative or complement to physical study-abroad and exchange programs in the discussion that follows the two case studies.

The Connect Program is Soliya’s flagship Exchange 2.0 initiative and is the program we first adopted at Georgia College and Kennesaw State University (KSU) in 2013. In the Connect Program, groups of eight to 10 students from around the world, including students from Muslim-majority countries, meet for two hours once a week for eight to 10 weeks via Soliya’s customized videoconferencing technology. The weekly discussions are mediated by one or two Soliya-trained facilitators from more than 25 countries, and the dialogue is guided by a curriculum that includes readings, in-class activities, and an end-of-semester video project. The Connect curriculum can be (and in our case was) embedded within an accredited, credit-bearing course. There are also some days set aside for open discussion.

The Connect Program’s espoused purposes are to: (1) establish a deeper understanding of the perspectives of others from around the world on important sociopolitical issues and the reasons why they feel the way they do; and (2) develop “21<sup>st</sup>-Century Skills” such as critical thinking, cross-cultural communication, and media literacy skills (Soliya, 2014c). The Connect Program has been credited with “maximizing impact along four learning metrics: empathy, cross-cultural communication skills, critical thinking, and activation (or pursuit of further cross-cultural engagement).” These metrics most closely approximate—in the online space—the impact of physical exchanges (Himelfarb & Idriss, 2011). According to Soliya’s website, the program has linked students from 100 universities and 27 countries in the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, Europe, and North America since 2003 (Soliya, 2014c). This would include students from Georgia College and KSU.

In April 2011, in Washington, DC, we, along with others involved with the American Association of State Colleges and Universities’ (AASCU’s) Global

Engagement Initiative, were introduced to Soliya. Soliya's fundamental operating principles closely aligned with the vision and aspirations of the AASCU Global Engagement Scholars: "We are living in a time of unprecedented interdependence. Addressing the challenges of the 21st Century, whether they pertain to the economy, our environment or our security, will require finding solutions that meet the needs of all" (Soliya, 2014b). The remainder of this paper describes case studies of Soliya's use on two campuses—Georgia College and Kennesaw State University—and concludes with an analysis of the experiences of these two institutions and suggestions for others who would like to connect with campuses in other countries.

### **Case Study of Georgia College**

#### **Course Overview, Objectives, and Student Learning Outcomes**

At Georgia College, we embedded the Connect Program curriculum in an Honors section of an upper division political science course, "POLS 4611: Contemporary International Problems." The course was co-taught by Dr. Steven Elliott-Gower and Dr. Steven Jones, the latter of whom provided the cross-cultural communications component to the course. Since "Contemporary International Problems" is a generic title, we gave the course the working title "America and the Muslim World." In the first class session, however, we acknowledged that both the generic and working titles were less than perfect. The generic title was imperfect because we didn't want to immediately frame and generalize U.S.-Muslim "world" relations as a "problem," although it is of course problematic. Our working title was short-hand for the United States and the West, on the one hand, and the wide variety of Muslim-majority regions and countries on the other. Yet, our first reading in the course, Edward Said's *Orientalism* (we started with the most difficult of the readings), allowed us to explore the shortcomings of the phrase "the Muslim World."

The course objectives were as follows:

- (1) Understand the historical context of the relationship between the West and the Muslim world.
- (2) Develop a deeper understanding of life in the Muslim world.
- (3) Understand the diversity of the Muslim world.
- (4) Develop cross-cultural communication skills.

We felt that the Connect Program would help our students achieve objectives 2, 3, and 4. We also felt that these were the sorts of objectives that one would expect to find in a physical exchange program, although the objectives of a physical exchange program might well focus on one particular Muslim-majority country.

The student learning outcomes (SLOs) were as follows:

- (1) Describe, in readings journals, critical aspects of the Muslim world and of the relationship between the West and the Muslim world.
- (2) Critically evaluate (a) media images and frames of the Muslim world, (b) U.S. foreign policy toward the Muslim world, and (c) stereotypes and preconceptions [that is, the students' stereotypes and preconceptions] about the Muslim world.
- (3) Demonstrate, in cross-cultural communication journals, the following cross-cultural communication skills and attributes: (a) mindfulness, (b) tolerance, (c) empathy, (d) adaptability, and (e) conflict management.

The first SLO was to be achieved primarily in the first half of the course when the students were doing readings, reflecting upon those readings in readings journals, and discussing readings in the seminar-format class. The second SLO was to be achieved through the social media project included in the Connect Program syllabus, although once they learned of the project, the students wanted to go further (this will be discussed in more detail later). The third SLO was to be achieved in the second half of the course when our students were engaged in their weekly discussions with other students from around the world, reflecting upon the practice of their cross-cultural communication skills in weekly journal entries, and returning to class later in the week for 75 minutes to share and reflect more upon those discussions.

To recap: In the first half of the course, the Georgia College Honors students read, wrote about, and discussed books and articles related to Islam and international relations, and received cross-cultural communications training. In the second half of the course, they participated in discussions, via videoconferencing, about Islam, life in Muslim countries, and relations between the West and Muslim-majority countries, and, in doing so, drew upon the readings and practiced and reflected upon their cross-cultural communication skills.

**The Soliya experience.** From the Georgia College students' perspectives, the Soliya experience was extremely valuable and positive. Our students

experienced some early technical problems, but these were swiftly resolved by Soliya's efficient technical support staff; however, students in countries with less robust information infrastructures faced more challenging technical issues. Our students were also disappointed by the absences and lack of participation in early sessions. They felt that the students from non-Western countries were at least initially reluctant to engage in conversation. However, they also reported to us that they were mindful of not dominating discussions, to avoid conforming to others' potential stereotypes of Americans. It seems therefore that there was a certain amount of dancing around and sizing up among the students before substantive discussions began. Our Honors students were anxious to engage in these discussions and were at times frustrated by the "ice-breakers" and by facilitators who they felt were long-winded, sometimes impeded good discussion, and occasionally ended discussions too soon. Yet overall, the students engaged in good (though oftentimes difficult) discussions, developed relationships with each other (some stayed in touch after the course), and, as we will discuss in the next section, learned a great deal.

**Assessment of student learning outcomes.** At Georgia College, there were three main student learning outcomes. A general assessment of these outcomes will be provided in this section, and direct quotations from students appear in Appendix A. The three learning outcomes were assessed from student work in journals and in the final reflection essay, which took the form of a memo to Secretary of State John Kerry that was to include policy recommendations to improve understanding between the U.S and the Muslim world, with a focus on Muslim youth.

***Student learning outcome 1: Describe critical aspects the Muslim world and of the relationship between the West and the Muslim world.*** Through their readings and Soliya participation, students learned how Western, particularly American, news and popular media have negatively framed Islam and the Muslim world. Student responses in journals and the final reflections indicated that they recognized bias in the way media presented Muslims post-9/11. As one student reported in the final reflection, "The best way for Muslim people to have better representation is to have them represent themselves" (see more complete quotation in Appendix A).

***Student learning outcome 2: Critically evaluate (a) media images and frames of the Muslim world, (b) U.S. foreign policy towards the Muslim world,***

*and (c) stereotypes and preconceptions [that is, the students' stereotypes and preconceptions] about the Muslim world.* Students recognized critical issues related to this outcome. One student who usually advocated for a limited role for government came to understand why a Muslim student might want the government to limit negative images of Muslims. Students recognized the ways in which U.S. policy in the Middle East might lead Muslims to view the entire Iraq War as an act of terrorism. Many students had also been previously unaware of the drone attacks in Pakistan and their impacts. Students also recognized the preconceptions they held about Islam and the Muslim world, and acknowledged how little they actually know. (See Appendix A for more specific quotations and comments.)

*Student learning outcome 3: Demonstrate, in cross-cultural communication journals, the following cross-cultural communication skills and attributes: (a) mindfulness, (b) tolerance, (c) empathy, (d) adaptability, and (e) conflict management.* One of the most encouraging aspects of Georgia College's Soliya experience was that many of the students reported the ability to apply and practice the cross-communication skills they had studied in the first half of the course. This did, however, require a very conscious effort on their part, and these skills were actually acquired and practiced over the course of an entire semester—which may not have been possible during a summer study-abroad program. As one student stated, “Being mindful and empathizing have certainly helped me understand opinions and behaviors of others that I do not necessarily share” (see Appendix A for a more complete quotation).

### **Case Study of Kennesaw State University**

#### **Course Overview, Objectives, and Student Learning Outcomes**

At Kennesaw State University, the “Soliya Dialogue” is described as a hybrid course providing students with a nurturing environment that facilitates the learning and application of cross-cultural communication skills.

Launched in the fall of 2012, Dr. Maia C. Hallward, Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Affairs, and Professor Ken Hill, Senior Lecturer of Management, in the Honors College designed a course structured around a small international dialogue group that provides foundational readings and activities that allow students to better examine and understand themselves as



they prepare to engage in eight, two-hour dialogue sessions that focus on increasing an understanding between the “West” and the Islamic world.

Structured around a small international dialogue group, the class incorporates foundational readings and activities that allow students to better examine and understand themselves as they prepare to engage in eight, two-hour dialogue sessions that focus on increasing an understanding between the “West” and the Islamic world. Each of the three completed course iterations have challenged students to complete the following student learning objectives:

- (1) Identify the phases of intercultural development and locate themselves within a spectrum of growth and development phases.
- (2) Identify various dimensions of culture that impact group formation, communication, and leadership styles.
- (3) Reflect on their own cultural tendencies, how those were formed, and how they impact each student’s personal relationships.
- (4) Understand the basic history and culture of the Islamic world.
- (5) Engage in constructive dialogue with people from a variety of cultures, including the Middle East, North Africa, Europe, and East Asia.
- (6) Create a short video highlighting different views of the relationship between the “West” and the Islamic world.

While much of the course learning came from the weekly dialogue sessions, important class readings (supplied by both Soliya and the KSU instructors) and assignments were also essential. The assignments included two reflection essays and a Soliya-guided video project. In the first essay, students wrote an eight- to 10-page reflection paper that discussed lessons learned during the semester. The paper reflected critically on the experiences of the weekly dialogues and how they connected with the readings discussed in class. We made it clear to students that this was not a research paper but rather a self-directed narrative essay that was to examine one’s own growth and change as a result of the program, drawing on examples from the dialogue and weekly journaling that the students had kept to chart growth and change. In the second essay—a less formal and feedback-oriented assignment—students detailed what they learned in the course, responding to the following questions:

- (1) What did you gain from this class?

- (2) Would you recommend this class to another student? If so, why, and what would you say? If not, why not?
- (3) If you have been on a study-abroad experience, how did the Soliya dialogue experience compare to it in terms of (a) the depth of interaction with people of other cultures, (b) practical intercultural experience, and (c) learning about another culture?

Lastly, the video assignment, which was guided by the group-assigned Soliya facilitators, required students to select, assemble, and create a defined perspective (using supplied video clips) on a topic related to the course material. Approximately two minutes in length, this project simulated the development of a video news report that might be seen on a television broadcast.

**The Soliya experience.** From fall 2012 through spring 2014, a total of 22 students completed the Soliya Dialogue at KSU. The Soliya Dialogue course depended upon the active commitment and participation of each student both in regular class meetings and in the weekly small-group calls. Students were expected to attend all of the dialogue sessions, so attendance and participation as they were monitored and reported to the instructor of record were considered during grading.

Class preparation was also very important. Timeliness, engagement, and reflection were key to all class meetings. Students were encouraged to keep a weekly reflection journal to help with personal processing (though this was not specifically graded).

The overall structure of KSU's Soliya Dialogue course comprised two simple divisions. The first eight weeks were dedicated to preparing students to begin the cross-cultural dialogue sessions, while the second eight weeks focused on processing the weekly conversations through journaling and in-class discussions, and by continuing to examine the culture, life, and history of the Middle East and how those elements impact "East-West" relations. Assigned readings covered topics such as intercultural communication, cross-cultural competencies, culture and conflict, non-violent communication, the role of religion in governance, and the concept of democratic dialogue.

In addition to the assigned readings, the course was conducted interactively through a variety of learning pedagogies and techniques that

included discussion, video and virtual media, experiential activities, guest speakers, and intercultural communication self-assessments.

Like students at Georgia College, the preponderance of KSU students, in the final analysis, felt that the Soliya experience was overwhelmingly positive. Direct quotations from students in Appendix B provide examples of their experiences.

### **Assessment of Student Learning Objectives**

At Kennesaw State University, achievement of the six identified learning outcomes was easily recognizable based on the course structure, assignments, and the completion of the Soliya Connect aspect of the course. However, to gain a deeper and truer sense of the course's impact, KSU's Soliya project team conducted a program evaluation, posing follow-up questions to all course graduates (as of May 2014). These questions focused on (1) the students' most useful "take-aways" from the course, (2) the countries represented in their dialogue groups, (3) the students from the dialogue group with whom they maintained contact and the nature of that contact, and (4) how students have used their learning from the Soliya Dialogue class since the end of the course.

The following is an overview of the extent to which student learning objectives were achieved. Direct quotations relating to learning objectives appear in Appendix C and provide students' observations in their own voice.

- (1) Students were able to generally identify the phases of intercultural development and locate themselves within a spectrum of growth and development phases. The direct responses of students in Appendix C do not reflect the salience of this objective.
- (2) Students could generally identify various dimensions of culture that impact group formation, communication, and leadership styles. In particular, students emphasized the ways in which they came to understand how culture affects communication. They also gained an appreciation for the importance of careful listening and attempts to understand others.
- (3) Students reported that they reflected on their own cultural tendencies, how those tendencies were formed, and how they impact their personal relationships. One student commented that s/he had "a much deeper perspective on my own privileges." Another student reported that

“Soliya contributed to my self-reflection and growth.” Others suggested in various ways that the experience helped them look at their personal relationships in different ways.

- (4) Students’ increased understanding of the basic history and culture of the Islamic world was reflected in a variety of ways. The completion of course assignments reflected these enhanced understandings. In the final program evaluation, students reported that they “gained a deeper understanding for the Arab and Muslim cultures” and “learned about the people and the ‘heart’ of the culture.”
- (5) Related to engaging in constructive dialogue with people from a variety of other cultures, including the Middle East, North Africa, Europe, and East Asia, students clearly appreciated their discussions with people from several cultures. Comparing the Soliya opportunity to a study-abroad experience, one student reported that, “in this dialogue, I was able to have more interaction and more in-depth conversation.” Another student wrote that “this course puts the student in touch with real people living in the Arab world, and that widens one’s perspectives.”
- (6) Students completed a short video as a class assignment. These videos indicated that students developed different views of the relationship between the “West” and the Islamic world.

See Appendix C for additional quotations from KSU students that relate to learning objectives.

### **Program Assessment**

Equally important is the question of how Soliya, as an organization, assesses and validates its Connect Program? At this writing, several efforts are taking place. Leveraging the work of Bruneau and Saxe (2012) and working in concert with MIT’s Saxelab Cognitive Neuroscience Lab, Soliya’s next steps include establishing significant measures of impact, popularizing those measures, and then educating both policy-makers and leaders in various related disciplines as to the viability of virtual exchange. Conducting two studies involving Mexican immigrants and White Americans in the U.S. and Israelis and Palestinians in the Middle East, Bruneau and Saxe assessed the impact that virtual “perspective giving” had on attitude, concluding that there is a meaningful positive relationship. More recently, in response to the recent Boston Marathon bombing and citing the

findings of an unpublished, in-process study released in the summer of 2013, Soliya and MIT's Neuroscience Lab compared the responses of a control group to those of Soliya program participants, concluding that students engaged in the Soliya program were less likely to assign broader, negative stereotypical meaning to the affiliated group to which the Tsarnaev brothers belong, namely non-Arab Muslims. The implication of this finding is important as it suggests that participation in the Soliya Connect program likely acts as a deterrent to escalating intergroup conflict by generalizing individual behaviors across a group (personal communication, June 27, 2013).

### **Critique**

How does the Soliya experience compare to an actual study-abroad experience? The answer depends on the particular study-abroad or international educational exchange, and on the purpose and learning objectives of the particular program. For example, a study-abroad program in a Muslim-majority country which includes real dialogue with local students, along with visits to historic, religious, and community sites, would surely offer a more enriching experience than sitting in front of a computer screen. Also, the Soliya experience cannot be compared to a study-abroad program focusing on, say, English literature or Italian art.

The Soliya experience was, however, a rich one for Georgia College's student participants. For a fraction (about one-tenth) of the cost of a traditional study-abroad experience, the students had deep, meaningful, sustained dialogue with international students whom they would not likely have had contact with otherwise for reasons associated with the "Quadruple-A" problem noted earlier.

However, while Soliya supplied the "big concept" and furnished the technological means for connecting our students with international students, including those from Muslim-majority countries, the curriculum was thin and haphazard. That said, the curriculum was designed to be built upon—and we did build upon it. More importantly, though, the critical ingredient to the success of Georgia College's Soliya experiment was Dr. Steven Jones' semester-long focus on cross-cultural communication training, practice, and reflection. This was not a part of the Soliya curriculum.

At KSU, in the most recent iteration of the Soliya course in spring 2014, students elected to convert the regular Soliya three-credit course into a more

academically rigorous Honors version. They wanted to compare and contrast the (virtual) Soliya experience to an actual (face-to-face) international experience or study abroad. The students had participated in a study-abroad program in Salvador, Brazil a year earlier.

A learning contract was developed proposing that students compare a face-to-face experience by creating partnerships and meeting on three occasions with international students who are a part of KSU's International Students Association (ISA). Each of the student partners was from a Muslim-majority country (i.e., Saudi Arabia, Algeria, and Egypt). The group structured conversations around similar topics and questions discussed in the online Soliya meetings. At the conclusion of the course, students presented their findings to a group of faculty and administrators.

The presentation and discussion were informative. Broadly, the team concluded that Soliya provided an excellent forum for very positive intercultural exchange. The students acknowledged that Soliya's small-group format created an opportunity for developing intercultural relationships with some level of intimacy and authenticity. However, the students recommended increasing the number of conversations and the frequency of smaller breakout sessions within the Soliya dialogue groups as a way to facilitate even deeper relationships. The team acknowledged that some traditional study-abroad programs can present a "sanitized" view of a country or region, or offer superficial experiences that lack an individual or one-to-one component. The Soliya program or a face-to-face engagement clearly mitigates that possibility.

Finally, KSU students, like those at Georgia College, identified pros and cons of the technology. The platform links vast regions of the globe; however, the students concluded that technical issues negatively affected the quality of their conversations during their eight-week Soliya sessions, a hurdle obviously not present in their one-on-one conversations on campus.

It should be noted, as well, that alternative models of providing Internet-based connections with students in different countries are available, including a model called Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL). Developed by the State University of New York, this model is explained in an informative website and in a free *Faculty Guide for COIL Course Development* (SUNY COIL Center, 2015).

### **Conclusion**

Despite some technical difficulties, we conclude that when supplemented with additional reading materials and other resources (including cross-cultural communication resources), Soliya's Connect Program offered our students an educationally valuable, low-cost alternative to traditional study abroad. As the information technology improves and becomes more accessible to students in developing countries, Soliya and other virtual international educational exchange programs could play a significant role in bringing together students from diverse cultural backgrounds, increasing mutual understanding, and "shifting from a model of confrontation and coercion to a model of cooperation and compassion." Exchange 2.0 may well be yet another disruptive technology affecting the future of higher education—in this case, the way in which we approach international education.

## References

- Bruneau E., & Saxe R. (2012). The power of being heard: The benefits of “perspective-giving” in the context of intergroup conflict. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 48(4), 855-866.
- Exchange 2.0. (2014). What is virtual exchange? Retrieved from <http://exchange2point0.org/>
- Gudykunst, W. B. (2004). *Bridging differences: Effective intergroup communication* (4th ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Himelfarb, S., & Idriss, S. (2011). *Exchange 2.0. Special Report*. Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace. Retrieved from <http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/Exchange2.0.pdf>
- Institute of International Education. (2013). Profile of U.S. study abroad students, 2001/02-2011/12. Retrieved from <http://www.iie.org/opendoors>
- Massachusetts Institute of Technology. (2012). The power of being heard. Retrieved from <http://newsoffice.mit.edu/2012/conflict-resolution-0315>
- Soliya. (2014a). Exchange 2.0. Retrieved from [http://www.soliya.net/?q=what\\_we\\_do\\_exchange20](http://www.soliya.net/?q=what_we_do_exchange20)
- Soliya. (2014b) *Fact sheet*. Retrieved from [www.soliya.net](http://www.soliya.net)
- Soliya. (2014c). What we do. Retrieved from [http://www.soliya.net/?q=what\\_we\\_do\\_overview](http://www.soliya.net/?q=what_we_do_overview)
- SUNY COIL Center (2015). Retrieved from <http://coil.suny.edu/home>



## **Appendix A: Georgia College Student Comments Related to Student Learning Outcomes**

### ***SLO 1: Describe, in readings journals, critical aspects the Muslim world and of the relationship between the West and the Muslim world.***

“The best way for Muslim people to have better representation is to have them represent themselves. Post-911 media portrayed Muslims using connections between images from the tragedy and clips/photographs taken from overseas. We allowed ourselves to define the look, the sound, and the feel of the Middle East . . . The Muslim people and other demographics living in the Middle East should be allowed their right to define *themselves* to the people of America.”

This quote is from one Georgia College student’s final reflection essay, written in the form of a policy memo to Secretary of State John Kerry. The assignment was to write a set of policy recommendations to improve understanding between the U.S. and the Muslim world with a focus on Muslim youth. Through their readings and Soliya participation, students learned how Western, namely American, news and popular media have negatively framed Islam and the Muslim world. The student here at least implicitly recognizes the problem of orientalism posed by Edward Said.

### ***SLO 2a: Critically evaluate media images and frames of the Muslim world.***

“One student who was a Muslim [in the Connect Program] argued that the government should be in charge of media . . . At first I couldn’t comprehend why he could not see why government controlled media would not benefit anyone. Then I thought it might be possible that from his perspective the evil that biased media has done to him as a Muslim living in America may cause him to truly believe that changing the media is a necessary evil. Perhaps he has been scarred by what the media has said about his people. I don’t know what that feels like. Maybe I would feel the same way. I still don’t think that we should make news a government venue, but I can now understand why someone may want that extreme measure.”

The student who wrote this reflection held strong libertarian perspectives on government and the economy. Although, as he states, his basic political beliefs

did not change, he began to realize that the values of democracy and freedom, as viewed by many Americans, are not self-evident to many of his peers in the Muslim world.

***SLO 2b: Critically evaluate U.S. foreign policy towards the Muslim world.***

“It occurred to me to ask some students from the Middle East about acts of terrorism that they have experienced. When I did this, three of my friends answered that they felt like the entire Iraq War was an act of terrorism on the part of the United States. That perspective had never occurred to me before, nor do I think it ever would have if I hadn’t had this opportunity to talk with students from the MENA region.”

Several of the students had similar experiences as a result of their Soliya conversations. Many of them had not known about the drone attacks in Pakistan before this course. When the subject came up in their Soliya conversations, they were shocked by the civilian casualties resulting from the attacks and not surprised that their peers perceived those attacks as acts of terrorism as well. Not all of the students agreed that the use of drones against terrorist targets should stop, but they all realized that there is a great deal of moral ambiguity surrounding the use of drones.

***SLO 2c: Critically evaluate stereotypes and preconceptions [that is, the students’ stereotypes and preconceptions] about the Muslim world.***

“I consider myself a fairly well educated person, but one of the main things I realized this semester is how little I actually know. I had no idea of the complexity that exists in Islamic culture. . . . There is no ‘one’ monolithic Islamic culture, which seems to be the widely held schema. Additionally, there is huge diversity within the Arabic ethnicity, not all of which falls under the umbrella of Islam. *In order to successfully interact with another person, you need to have sufficient knowledge of their background to appreciate their uniqueness, acknowledging both the group and individual aspects. Obviously, this cannot happen if you are woefully ignorant of nearly all aspects of a person’s identity* [emphasis added], and this applies to American society. If we are even to begin building a positive image of the US, especially in the eyes of Muslim youth, we have to demonstrate that we have some knowledge of Islamic and MENA region cultures.”

This quote not only represents how students addressed their own preconceptions about Islam and the Muslim world but also demonstrates what they learned about intercultural communication. The emphasized text reflects one of the central premises of the textbook we used to introduce intercultural communication—that communication is shaped by identity, and identity is shaped by culture. Successful communication is based on mutual understanding of the other’s identity. The irony of this particular selection is that the student who wrote it did not at all enjoy reading the Gudykunst (2004) textbook!

***SLO 3: Demonstrate, in cross-cultural communication journals, the following cross-cultural communication skills and attributes: (a) mindfulness, (b) tolerance, (c) empathy, (d) adaptability, and (e) conflict management.***

“[T]his week, I have been able to practice mindful communication both with strangers and with members of my ingroups. In my experience, being mindful, expressing empathy, and being flexible are some of the most important ‘tools’ we can use in order to achieve effective communication. These concepts are probably the main idea that I will take away from reading *Bridging Differences*. . . Being mindful and empathizing have certainly helped me understand opinions and behaviors of others that I do not necessarily share. During the Connect discussions, I can use mindfulness and empathy to ‘take a step back’ and attempt an accurate description, interpretation and evaluation of strangers [sic] behavior before I react emotionally to it.”

This was one of the most encouraging aspects of Georgia College’s Soliya experience. Many of the students reported the ability to apply and practice the cross-communication skills they had studied in the first half of the course. It did, however, require a very conscious effort on their part, and these skills were acquired and practiced over the course of an entire semester—which may not have been possible during a summer study abroad program.

## **Appendix B: The Soliya Experience at Kennesaw State University**

We can best understand the student experience through their own voice. The following are some quotes excerpted from in-course essays and feedback provided by students who have completed the course:

“[W]e were given an ample amount of background information through articles and studies... [T]hese articles laid a good foundation to build from during the dialogue.”

“What I learned and what I struggled with helped me grow as a person and grow in my intercultural communication.”

“I struggled with the virtual aspect of this program the most... I felt restricted being in a box on a screen trying to present across to people who didn't know me.”

“The things that I struggled with were parts of me that I had never explored before... [T]he dimensions and complexities of those situations you were taught in the classroom expand to a whole new level when you are faced with them in real-life.”

“Everyone had a chance to talk and explain themselves. If something was not explained in enough detail, then the facilitator or another student would ask for clarification. Everyone was kept on track and punctual (more or less), so the differences in linear and multi-active personalities did not play a large role. I think if such a program were held in person, communication skills would make more of a difference. Since everyone could only be seen by a choppy video feed, nonverbal communication could not be communicated.”

“I learned so much about the Arab World. At first, I thought that this class would just be easy and fun; getting to talk to students from around the world for two hours a week. But intercultural communication takes work. It was necessary for me to be aware of my own culture and how people might view me in addition to relearning everything I thought I knew about a different culture.”

“Despite challenges (i.e. attendance, shy participants and struggling group dynamics), I can definitely conclude that I had a valuable experience

participating in the Soliya Connect program. I had the unique opportunity to develop relationships with students all over the world and hear their perspectives on challenging issues. I was able to think critically about American culture and compare it to my partners' cultures. The dialogue combined with in-class articles provided a well-rounded analysis of Western/Arabic dynamics.”

“This gaining of an understanding of Arabic and Muslim cultures was very important to me, as it gave me a framework for understanding. It will allow me to ask better questions in the future as I dive deeper in understanding Middle East culture. Now I have context for my future interactions with Arabs and Muslims.”

“What I learned from this breakout activity was that if one country takes the time to truly understand another country's problems and the history and roots of those problems that solutions can more easily be reached...solutions to cultural conflicts are fragile in nature, there is no quick fix to deeply rooted conflicts and third party mediation can help if done in the right way and does not become overly assertive.”

“From weekly dialogues to in-class discussions, I can honestly say that I learned more about social dynamics than ever before. Because cultural competency plays such a vital role in the ever-expanding world, by limiting our exposure to people who are deemed ‘different,’ we restrict ourselves from understanding the importance of human relationships as a whole. My new understanding of Middle Eastern culture has not only given me terrific insights on people and their traditions but also knowledge about the importance of dialogue and the process of unification between people of different backgrounds.”

“Most of all I have found that although we are all shaped by our cultures, we are further shaped by our own ideas and experiences. These things make each and every one of us an individual regardless of what we look like, where we were born, what language we speak or how we choose to worship. If societies and governments could get to know each other in this manner, if we could all see each other as human beings rather than putting each other in boxes and creating ‘us versus them’ scenarios, then there might be hope for a peaceful future for all.”

### **Appendix C: Kennesaw State University Student Comments Related to Student Learning Outcomes**

To date, only 10 (out of a group of 22) students have completed our query, and we acknowledge that this is an opportunity for the KSU team going forward. The following is a selection of responses shared by students:

#### ***Question 1 (“useful take-away”):***

“The specific knowledge of not only Middle Eastern culture a student could only get in this class or by actually traveling to the region and experiencing the culture in full force with the people. The expert professors are key in this ‘take away’ because some of them were actually a part of the Middle Eastern culture. Also the dialogues were equally important in learning this specific knowledge because we were talking with people that were living in the region.”

“The ability to be tactful with other people from very diverse [cultures] that often have very stark opinions on topics than you like abortion, state policies, U.S relations with the world and the Middle East region, death penalty, rules of war, all areas of terrorism and how to compromise on the personal and state level with people from other cultures.”

“I think one of the most practical take-aways was realizing just how much culture affects communication. For instance, some cultures will focus more on getting to know your family and background while some cultures are not as ‘warm’ at first.”

“The greatest thing I took away from this course was the importance of listening and understanding. I tend to dismiss what disagrees with me, and the formatting allowed me to really listen and reflect before speaking. I learned so much from it.”

“I gained life-long knowledge and friendships from the Soliya Dialogue program. I learned more from this program than I have in most of my previous classes at KSU. I learned that different cultures can come together and work with each other in a positive way.”

“The most useful takeaway I have from the dialogue was a much deeper perspective on my own privileges. I had never had an opportunity to speak with people my age who have to deal with danger or fear on a regular basis and I will never forget the communications that we have had nor the things that these students have taught me.”

“I learned to overcome the frustration and intimidation that I felt when trying to input my opinion in the virtual discussions. Soliya contributed a lot to my self-reflection and growth.”

“I have walked away with a group of people who truly respect me and appreciate my place in this world we share.”

“I gained a deeper appreciation for the Arab and Muslim cultures. I know now more about the Middle East and Arab world than I ever have before.”

***Question 2 (“recommend to others”):***

“I would *highly* recommend (and have already) this class. This has been the most valuable class to me *ever* and I truly believe whoever is qualified to experience this class would greatly benefit. I would tell people that they would benefit from learning about and talking directly to people from varied cultures. Other than study abroad, I don’t know of a better way to immerse yourself in another culture(s)!”

“I would absolutely recommend it and I would tell them about the importance of hearing from a person’s raw perspective what’s going on and how they feel. Now I have great friends all over the world, and how the class taught me to be ready to verbalize my beliefs and defend them if necessary.”

“I would absolutely recommend this class even to the least interested student. It can teach everyone something about conflict, dialogue and this culture that eludes so many in the States. My views have changed, and my ideology has evolved through the course which is really important.”

“Because of the class I am thinking more openly about the idea of free speech, and I have learned so much about a cultural interactions point of view.”

“I would recommend this class only on two conditions: if someone has an open mind and heart and if they are prepared to step out of their comfort zone.”

***Question 3 (“compare with a traditional study abroad”):***

“It’s different than a study abroad in that you aren’t immersing yourself in a culture. You aren’t forced to learn to survive in a foreign culture. You are in the comfort zone of a familiar place with distance between you and your group. I think that the interaction is better in Soliya though because you are given that chance to actually talk to others like you. Actually I like the perspective of someone in another country.”

“On a 10-day study abroad, I felt that I learned more about the country and culture (as a whole) where I was visiting. However, in this dialogue, I was able to have more interaction and more depth in conversation as I learned about the people and the ‘heart’ of a culture. In terms of practical cultural experience, I think that both the dialogue and the study abroad experience were equally valuable.”

“There is definitely room for comparison, though it is still not the same as being fully immersed in a foreign environment. Like studying abroad, this course puts the student in touch with real people living in the Arab world, and that widens ones perspective. If this class were condensed into a book (or missing the dialogue sessions), you wouldn’t learn a third as much. I felt at the end like I had cultural exposure to a part of the world I had never been to.”

“These two opportunities are hard to compare. In the context of intercultural communications, I gained more from the Soliya Dialogue experience. It forces you to actively participate in the discussions, whereas in my study abroad I could sit back and not actively participate. I did come back from my study abroad with the knowledge that I had immersed myself in another culture.”

“Cultural immersion was a much stronger teacher but it doesn’t allow for a time of reflection or discussion to help understand what it is you are experiencing. Soliya allowed interactions with citizens from areas broadly viewed as conflict zones or threats. This was very useful.”



***Question 4 (“still in contact”):***

“I have kept in contact with one student from Tunisia. I use Facebook mostly and a bit of Instagram. I communicate with this student about once a month and we ask about how are [sic] college endeavors are going and planning opportunities to meet in person one day. I am very close to meeting with this student from Tunisia as well.”

***Question 5 (“skill or action that you use elsewhere”):***

“The best example is every time I watch the news about the Middle East or other national level news or anything we talked about in the dialogue I contact my friend from Tunisia and ask him his opinion and his point of view. We discuss this with no limits and the enriching conversation doesn’t stop there, I discuss what I discussed with my friend with my family, professors, students and random strangers on the elevator ...not so much as to correct them but to offer my learned knowledge so they can then make a better more unbiased informed decision, and that I must say is where we as humans start making the difference and not just taking what the media says as 100% correct.”

“I refer back to my dialogue sessions every single day. Because it was dialogue-based, there was an emotional connection to the topics we discussed and that stayed with me. I have adapted and changed some of my habits to reflect what I learned. I apply it to conversation, because I know how differently communication occurs across cultures. I am more honest in my speaking, but more respectful (I feel) of the difficulties another may have in communicating with me, or anyone else. I am more patient with people in day to day life.”

“I especially use what I have learned in this class when communicating with two of my conversation partners; one from India, one from Korea. I have especially learned to be more sensitive about questions I as [sic], but I’m careful not to appear patronizing. I try to genuinely recognize the cultural differences, but at the same time revere our commonality: we are women, we are students, and most of all we are friends.”

“As you read, definite trends emerge. Clearly, the Soliya Dialogue provided students with the opportunity to honestly self-examine, reflect

and deepen their inquiry, learning and intercultural communication skills with a diverse group of people who have experienced a very different but equally salient cultural worldview.”

### Biographies



Dr. Steven Elliott-Gower is director of the Honors Program and associate professor of political science at Georgia College. He is faculty advisor to the Honors Residential Learning Community, *Eta Sigma Alpha*, Model United Nations, and Model Arab League. He teaches international relations, global issues, and U.S. foreign policy, and is the author and editor of numerous books, articles, and book chapters on weapons proliferation, including *International Cooperation on Nonproliferation Export Controls*. He has also designed and led study-abroad programs around the world.



Professor Ken Hill joined Kennesaw State University as an adjunct faculty member in the fall of 2002. He earned a bachelor's degree from the University of South Alabama in 1979 and a Master of Arts in Education and Human Development from The George Washington University in 1993. He has worked in the fields of operations management, training and organization development, and human resources, and has consulted with a number of Fortune 200 organizations through his work with Development Dimensions International. An AASCU Global Engagement Scholar, he began teaching and working in the interdisciplinary global challenges field in 2009.