

12-19-2022

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Recommended Citation

Newman, M., & Torretta, A. (2022). New Jersey 4-H Junior Explorers Virtual Short-Term Exploratory Program (STEP). *The Journal of Extension*, 60(4), Article 9. <https://doi.org/10.34068/joe.60.04.09>

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New Jersey 4-H Junior Explorers Virtual Short-Term Exploratory Program (STEP)

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Abstract. During the worldwide pandemic, youth were isolated from each other. In response, New Jersey 4-H, a part of Rutgers Cooperative Extension, created the Junior Explorers, a virtual exchange program bringing together 4-H members with youth from other countries. This program provides youth ages 10-13 with access to international exchange opportunities that would otherwise be sparse for this age group. This program has demonstrated that Extension professionals can successfully adapt exchanges to a virtual platform. With youth the world over learning virtually, Extension professionals have a unique opportunity to learn from and collaborate with international partners to enhance existing programs.

INTRODUCTION

During the worldwide pandemic, youth were isolated from neighbors, friends, and classmates. In response, New Jersey 4-H created the Junior Explorers Program (<https://nj4h.rutgers.edu/junior-explorers/>), a virtual exchange program bringing together New Jersey 4-H members with youth from other countries. We collaborated with partners from Russia and Italy with whom we worked previously during the 2019 4-H International Camp United Program (Torretta, Newman, & Kinsey, 2020). Because of these existing partnerships, we were able to establish the virtual exchange at the height of the pandemic when youth around the globe were isolated and most in need of connection.

The goals of the program are to:

- Develop successful model for virtual international exchange programs
- Promote cross cultural awareness in youth ages 10–13 with other countries
- Craft a unique learning experience for youth who are too young to travel internationally with traditional 4-H exchange programs

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

The Junior Explorers program allows for adult international partners to self-select which aspects of their country they deem culturally significant to share with American youth, thereby avoiding what Kramsch (2014) calls the reductionist stereotypes or tourist representations. International partners were equal collaborators in program planning as content was mirrored by each country. The Elements of Culture (2016) defined culture as the symbols, language, beliefs, values, and artifacts that are part of any society. Building on this definition, we collectively chose topics such as language, legends and stories, music and dance, hands on cooking, and famous landmarks to share with the youth.

We held a series of four meetings with U.S. and the partnering country planners via Zoom to design the program. We identified culturally relevant sessions (Table 1) to explore over the course of the five-week program.

Table 1. Sample Schedule

Week/Session	Session Topic
Week 1, Session 1	Road Trip! Ice breakers (distribute pretest survey)
Week 1, Session 2	Language and Communication
Week 2, Session 3	American legends (Johnny Appleseed/NJ Devil)
Week 2, Session 4	Italian Legends of Colapesce and the Roman gods
Week 3, Session 5	American Cuisine (applesauce bars)
Week 3, Session 6	Italian Cuisine (frutta martorana)
Week 4, Session 7	American Music (Square Dancing, and the evolution of African American music, Rythm and Blues)
Week 4, Session 8	Italian Music and Dance (Tarantella Scarf Dance)
Week 5, Session 9	Virtual Escape Room (distribute of posttest surveys)

PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

Youth participants, ages 10–13 years old, were recruited to meet virtually twice per week for five weeks to explore each other’s cultures. Each program cohort had thirty youth (15 from each country). The number of thirty youth was determined to be the best opportunity for young people to more readily make personal connections with each other. Led by U.S. and foreign educators, the program was conducted in English and covered a variety of aspects from each culture. The U.S./Russian cohort was led by four foreign and five U.S. educators; the U.S./Italian cohort was led by three foreign and five U.S. educators. As seen in table 1, each week was an in-depth exploration of one aspect of culture.

EVALUATION

Youth were surveyed at the beginning of the first virtual club meeting and again after the last virtual club meeting for each cohort. Each of the program participants were given a pretest and posttest which used a Likert scale of 1–5, with 1 being “not at all,” and 5 being “a lot.” We evaluated cultural awareness and program content.

CROSS CULTURAL AWARENESS

The pretest/posttests showed that youth increased their awareness about another culture. The participants in the U.S./Italian program reported their base knowledge at 1.70 on the pretests. On the posttests, that number rose to 3.80. Youth that participated in the U.S./Russian program reported baseline knowledge of 3.37 on the pretests and 4.15 on the posttests.

“Being in ‘lockdown’ has really made me miss my friends, my classmates, and my 4-H family. The Russian/USA 4-H program...gave me new friends from thousands of miles away that are now family.”—Sal (USA)

“I really like to study maps. I love history. The Russian/USA 4-H program helped me bridge my history and map knowledge into real people and places. I saw things deeper than my regular social studies classes and I connected with the beauty of the country and its people. I am grateful to 4-H for this opportunity.”—Enzo (USA)

4-H Junior Explorers

PROGRAM CONTENT

Program content each week was evaluated to gauge programmatic interest. Evaluations revealed that youth felt the program content designed by the team was strong (Tables 2 and 3). On a scale 1–5 with 5 being excellent.

Table 2. U.S./Italian Sessions

Date	U.S./Italian Sessions	n*	Program Content
10/19/20	ROAD TRIP! And Ice breakers	28	4.54
10/22/20	Communication Between Cultures Using Non-Verbal Communication	25	4.64
10/26/20	U.S. Legends	29	4.62
10/29/20	Italian Gods and Legends	26	4.69
11/2/20	Leadership Development	24	3.96
11/5/20	American Music	25	4.84
11/9/20	American Cuisine	24	4.67
11/12/20	Italian Cuisine	22	4.82
11/16/20	Italian Music	20	4.70

*Number of logins (siblings shared computers)

Table 3. U.S./Russian Sessions

Date	U.S./Russian Sessions	n*	Program Content
7/13/20	Introduction to a Different Culture and Where in the World...	26	4.48
7/16/20	Communication Between Cultures Using the Cyrillic and Western Alphabets	23	4.70
7/20/20	Russian Stories	15	4.47
7/23/20	American Legends	15	4.87
7/27/20	Cooking Russian Blinis	15	4.87
7/30/20	Cooking American Buttermilk Pancakes	16	4.87
8/03/20	Escape Room	18	4.56
8/06/20	Russian and American Music and Dance	18	4.72

*Number of logins (siblings shared computers)

BEST PRACTICES FOR PROGRAM REPLICATION

1. Recruit three to four educators in each country committed to carrying out the program; meeting frequently can be a big commitment and not every educator will be able to make every session.
2. Include partner countries in planning. Advanced planning will help educators understand their role and how the program will run.
3. Recruit a manageable number of youths to participate in the program so to encourage social interaction among youths.
4. Schedule sessions multiple times throughout the week. This enhances the in-depth learning experience.

5. Make sessions interactive and include time for translations. The group can then practice the newly introduced word in each language. Though time is included for translations, the program is conducted primarily in English.
6. Spotlight! Spotlight! Spotlight! Learn how to use the spotlight feature in your virtual platform so you can highlight various youth during a task. For example, if cooking as a group, ask the kids to show off their 'whisking' skills one at a time then spotlight each of them.
7. Follow up with a between-session email to participants outlining newly introduced words learned during the past session and a summary of what was done so those who missed it can stay connected.

CONCLUSION

Thomas (2006) defined cultural intelligence as the ability to interact effectively with culturally different people. Crowne (2013) found that exposing youth to other cultures has an impact on their cultural intelligence. The Junior Explorers program contributes to the development of cultural intelligence by providing youth access to international exchange opportunities virtually. The program demonstrated that Extension professionals can successfully adapt exchanges to a virtual platform. The pandemic continues to impact in-person programs and international travel. With youth across the world learning virtually, Extension professionals have a unique opportunity to learn from and partner with international partners to enhance existing programs. New Jersey is also open to forging new relationships with partners from additional countries and states for younger youth to travel virtually around the globe.

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