

Experiences Canada Virtual Exchanges Put Teens in the Driver's Seat for This! Is Canada Cross-Country Tour

(OTTAWA- April 13, 2021) Just over a year ago, Experiences Canada was recalling or cancelling travel for more than 2000 exchange participants as the pandemic took hold across the country. Since then the national youth charity that typically travels more than 5000 youth each year within Canada has shifted its programming online, offering workshops, webinars, and learning resources that continue to help young Canadians explore Canada in ways they may never have seen it before. As Covid-19 cases are once again on the rise, and schools are returning to online learning, the organization is providing an innovative option for teens to continue with their high school curricula and safely meet other Canadian youth as part of the learning experience.

"I think anyone with teenagers in their lives knows that the pandemic has been particularly hard on them. The most important connection youth are missing during the pandemic is the opportunity to connect with one another," explains Deborah Morrison, President and CEO. "That is why Experiences Canada is launching its latest initiative: **This! Is Canada**. At a time when so much is keeping them apart, we wanted to find more ways to bring young Canadians together as well as add some fun and excitement to their online learning."

This virtual exchange program is already involving thousands of teens from just under 100 communities from coast-to-coast-to-coast in a series of multi-media projects to share the stories of their communities with one another. The program is open to schools or youth groups to register for up to six different activity units that challenge them to create photo galleries, videos, and websites about the history, geography, arts and cultures that surround them. There is also an option for individual youth schooling at home to be twinned with other youth learning remotely. Whether in a classroom or learning online, participants complete their projects and then set up a time to connect virtually to share them with each other and discuss what they've discovered that's different, and what they have in common.

Jessica Lauzon, a French immersion teacher at Warnica School in Barrie, Ontario found the program through social media. "I feel as though with the loss of sports and so many changes in school 'normalcy', I needed to find something to engage the students while supporting French language acquisition. This! Is Canada was the perfect fit for our class. The students come to school each day asking 'is it Experiences Canada Day?'. I have never seen them more excited to speak and learn in French. A breath of fresh air during these trying times."

All of the activities have strong curriculum links for many language, social studies, and creative arts courses across Canada and may be easily incorporated into classroom plans.

Groups completing four or more activity units are pre-approved for an in-person exchange next year, whenever it is safe to travel again if they choose. The biggest reward is that each participating group is part of a nationwide virtual adventure, literally putting their community on the map – a Virtual map of Canada that is! **This! is Canada's** interactive map will be unveiled in a virtual celebration planned for Tuesday, June 29th providing a free virtual road trip across Canada for the rest of us - as seen through the eyes of our youth – just in time for Canada Day! The project will remain open for schools and youth to participate over the summer and into the next school year.

Linda Handiak teaches at Vanguard School in Montreal, QC, which offers adapted curriculum for 7-16 year olds with significant learning disabilities. Her students are twinned with a school in Cape Breton, NS. "School trips



and proms have been on ice for over a year now in our red zone,” she explains. “As uncertainty still dims the horizon, there is inestimable value in showing students that we are all in this together, globally. We hope that communication between our classes and their twins will continue beyond this year, regardless of whether we can travel physically or not. Teachers like to exchange projects and ideas and kids like an audience for their productions. Where physical travel may be prohibitive in terms of safety and/or cost, we are fortunate to have access to virtual exchanges.”

Experiences Canada opened up its exchange program for individual youth to apply for the first time in its 85-year history. Shayana Shimansky is a grade 11 student at Herzliah High School in Montreal paired with Jayna Galloway a grade 12 student from Kingsville High School in Ontario. Both teens signed up for the program because they wanted to share the unique history and culture of their communities not just with each other, but a wider public audience. For Jayna Galloway, a 5th generation resident of Canada’s most southerly inhabited point it’s community pride that drives her. “I grew up in a small peaceful community with no stop lights, breathtaking sunsets, had to take a plane or boat to high school and am very proud to call Pelee, home.”

That’s the exchange opportunity that Shayana Shimansky was hoping for. “I think it's important to learn about/interact with people from other environments. The only way for my opinions and ideas to be well rounded is if I open my mind and listen to other people's stories and points of view too.” She looks forward to sharing more insights into Montreal’s Jewish community. “I am so proud to be a Montreal Jew, which is why I feel an obligation to share my community with the world. The goal is for my project to contribute to the decrease of anti-Semitism while dismantling hurtful myths that target my community.”

This! Is Canada virtual exchange program is generously supported by the Department of Canadian Heritage and North West Company’s Healthy Horizon’s program. More information about the project and how to register can be found at <https://experiencescanada.ca/virtual-exchanges/>

About Experiences Canada

Experiences Canada is a national registered charity established over 85 years ago to support experiential learning through youth travel and exchanges within Canada for youth between the ages of 12 to 17. Best known for their reciprocal group exchange program that typically travels nearly 5000 youth and their chaperones every year, the organization also offers an annual Youth Leadership Forum along with a variety of online resources, webinars and workshops to build knowledge, confidence and skills and inspire greater civic engagement among youth.

To find out how you or your organization can help more youth experience Canada and stay meaningfully connected, please visit <https://experiencescanada.ca/donate/>.

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Experiences Canada : Featured Participants available for interview:

OPPORTUNITY FOR SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

Cheryl Gagné is a French Immersion teacher at KLO Middle School in Kelowna, BC. She registered three groups from her school who are twinned with three schools in Quebec and Inuvik. "I see the value in French Immersion students visiting and living another language and culture. For many of my students, they have been studying and learning in their second language for years, without having an opportunity to experience the culture or language first-hand. I hope that by participating in the virtual exchange, this experience will ignite a passion and desire to use their language skills and to further explore the Francophone culture and language. Already, I have seen students excited to meet their twins and to start a new friendship, even virtually!"

Her classes will be completing all six activity units created as part of the This! is Canada program. "Currently my students are on the Daily Life module and preparing video clips around our community and school. They are excited to highlight our amazing region, challenged to use their French oral language skills and to develop their technology skills. My students have already drafted bilingual letters and we have emailed them to their twinned schools in Quebec and Inuvik. Many have already started on-line communications.

Student Videos (French with English Subtitles) available here:

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/ogcxegclmglokr8/AADQJYOPhVwu4qSIaU8vOfI3a?dl=0>

SUPPORTS CURRICULUM

For **Valérie Doré and Geneviève Patry, teachers at Aubier High School in Levis, QC,** their primary goal is to help their students have opportunities to build their second language skills, both oral and written, in English. They have three groups of youth twinned with three different schools in Vancouver. However, they believe the program also aligns well with other, broader curriculum goals.

"Our students are in a program, Citizens of the World, and the objectives of these exchanges fit well with the values and skills that we want to develop in our students," explains Valerie Dore. "It is also important to get our students to bond with other young people from a different province. These links allow them to discover a culture, habits and customs from another community. Also, this exchange can stimulate the curiosity or the desire of our students to meet other people and perhaps, possibly, to travel to Canada. The virtual exchange, unlike the face-to-face exchange, also helps to further develop digital literacy skills in our students. "

Genevieve Patry describes the various exchange activities and how the team of teachers plan to integrate them into their school plans. "We chose the module on daily life so that our students can introduce themselves and share their living environment. Next, we will create an image gallery to present significant elements of our history in Quebec. We also want to do the one on Indigenous Perspectives since we participated in a conference on Indigenous art given by the National Gallery of Canada. The latter will lead us to present this perspective in our province. In closing, we will do the module on arts and culture. Our students will be able to share and promote the work of our Quebec artists. We also have students who practice music and fine arts in school and we want to show our associated schools the fruits of their labour. "

ACCESSIBLE PROGRAMMING

Linda Handiak teaches at Vanguard School in Montreal , a school that specializes on educating youth with disabilities. "School trips and proms have been on ice for over a year now in our red zone," she explains. "As uncertainty still dims the horizon, there is inestimable value in showing students that we are all in this together, globally. If, as Augustine of Hippo said, "The world is a book, and those who don't travel only read one page,"

then we're in danger of dwelling on the one page related to our own inconveniences. A shared problem breeds empathy and shared solutions. Many psychology professors cite openness to new experiences as an important ingredient for creativity to flourish."

"My colleagues and I want to open the book for our students (safely of course). We hope that the Experiences Canada virtual exchange reveals more pieces of the Canadian puzzle for our students. They live around Montreal, a cosmopolitan city, so Montreal tends to represent Quebec for them. It is hard for them to imagine a rural Quebec, for example, which also makes it hard to appreciate the efforts required to grow food and to work in rhythm with the land."

"We hope that communication between our classes and their twins will continue beyond this year, regardless of whether we can travel physically or not. Teachers like to exchange projects and ideas and kids like an audience for their productions. Where physical travel may be prohibitive in terms of safety and/or cost, we are fortunate to have access to virtual exchanges."

There are two groups from Vanguard School participating in the programme. The first, organized by Ms. Handiak, is twinned with Claude Garton school, another specialized school in Thunder Bay. The second group is working with Baddeck Academy in Cape-Breton, Nova Scotia.

SUPPORTING SCHOOLS WITH ONLINE LEARNING

Joelle Legresley is a francophone teacher at Ecole Place des Jeunes in Bathurst, NB and she is "twinned with **Jessica Lauzon, a french immersion teacher at Warnica School in Barrie, ON.** "Fifteen years ago, I decided to get involved in the Experiences Canada (formerly SEVEC) program following a retirement at our school," recalls Joelle Legresley. "Since that time, I have had 12 face-to-face exchanges and the 13th (let's hope the number had nothing to do with the circumstance!) had to be cancelled as a result of the pandemic. When I saw the opportunity for a virtual exchange, I immediately accepted because I found it unfortunate that my current students could not have the experience of getting to know another place in Canada and make new acquaintances. The virtual format allows young people to help each other learn more about our own region and that of our "twin's." I find the virtual exchange format to be excellent and think a virtual and in-person mix could enhance future exchanges when travel is allowed again."

Jessica Lauzon on the other hand came across the program through social media. It's the first time she's involved with an exchange. "We are a large class (28 students) with very little room to move and limited in our abilities to do group work as a result of COVID restrictions," Ms. Lauzon explains. "I pitched it to my Grade 7's who asked if we could start that day. Needless to say, they were craving something out of our normal. I feel as though with the loss of sports and so many changes in school 'normalcy', I needed to find something to engage the students while supporting French language acquisition. This! Is Canada was the perfect fit for our class. The students come to school each day asking 'is it Experiences Canada Day?'. I have never seen them more excited to speak and learn in French. A breath of fresh air during these trying times."

The two teachers have divided their classes into small groups of 5-6 and the students meet weekly with their twinned groups to work through the activity units created by Experiences Canada exploring the main question of "what make their community so special?"

Joelle Legresley notes "My students are super happy to participate in the virtual exchange. It gives them a unique and interesting experience and during these difficult times they feel like they are going through something important and part of a larger group. It is experiences like these that were left behind during COVID." Jessica Lauzon agrees. "It is really fantastic to see not only the friendships and French conversations that are happening but that students are able to lead their own learning by connecting with others their age."

PHOTOS available here for Jessica Lauzon's class in Barrie, ON:

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/6s72bumo5mvc5I7/AAC97BASSm7IVwdOMTYNWNba?dl=0>

SUPPORTING INDIVIDUAL LEARNING

Since many youth have been learning at home during COVID, Experiences Canada opened up its exchange program for individual youth to apply for the first time in its 85-year history. **Shayana Shimansky is a grade 11 student at Herzliah High School in Montreal**, she is paired with **Jayna Galloway a grade 12 student from Kingsville High School**. Both teens signed up for the program because they wanted to share the unique history and culture of their communities. For Jayna Galloway, a 5th generation resident of Canada's most southerly inhabited point it's community pride that drives her. "I wanted to put Pelee Island "on the map". I want to showcase Pelee Island to the rest of Canada and perhaps across the world. Growing up on Pelee was different than many other places in Canada. I grew up in a small peaceful community with no stop lights, breathtaking sunsets, had to take a plane or boat to high school and am very proud to call Pelee, home."

That's the type of opportunity to exchange that Shayana Shimansky was hoping for. "I think it's important to learn about/interact with people from other environments. The only way for my opinions and ideas to be well rounded is if I open my mind and listen to other people's stories and points of view too." She also looks forward to sharing more insights into Montreal's Jewish community. "I am so proud to be a Montreal Jew, which is why I feel an obligation to share my community with the world. I hope that if I expose the rest of Canada to the community, more people will become tolerant of Jews. The goal is for my project to contribute to the decrease of anti-Semitism while dismantling hurtful myths that target my community."

Both youth will be working on multi-media projects that will feature the unique history, geography, and culture of their respective communities and will, by the end of the school year be able to literally put their communities on the This! Is Canada interactive map featuring all of the youth projects for the world to see.

Ilona and Aislinn Drefs are 14-year old twin sisters from High Prairie, AB.

The two girls are twinned with two youth from Quebec. They've already connected a few times about their projects. Ilona thinks "[her] partner is cool. We easily find things to talk about when we meet every week. We are doing the activities, as we want to meet in person. During Covid, getting to interact with new people, especially when you live in the middle of nowhere, is nice."

Aislinn agrees adding "My partner is fun to talk to and I enjoy talking to her during our meets. The exchange is honestly a nice idea. I like that you can interact with people from other places. It's hard to meet new people during Covid so this is a great substitute."

PHOTOS of Ilona and Aislinn Drefs available here: <https://bit.ly/3mGXf6G>

PROJECT VIDEO from Ilona's partner in the exchange (youth not available for interviews but permission provided for video to be used by media) here: <https://bit.ly/3giVN9p>

THOMAS DUMONT AND HIS FATHER STEPHANE MAKE EXCHANGES A FAMILY TRADITION

Thomas Dumont from Boucherville, Quebec explains his interest in the program like this: "Now that I am 12 years old, I'm no longer eligible for day camps in the city. So I had to find something to do this summer. My father told me that when he was my age he spent two weeks in Ontario in an exchange program. So I did some research to see if this was possible with Experience Canada. However, only virtual exchanges are possible at this time.

Stephane Dumont adds: "I enrolled Thomas in the Experience Canada program, among other things, so that he could perfect his second language and meet young people his age who live in another community. Despite the pandemic, the virtual exchange program is a good way to achieve this goal. Of course, we hope that an in-person exchange may be possible in the coming months to permit a complete immersion experience in his second language. With this exchange, I am convinced that young people develop their self-confidence and are no longer afraid to express themselves in another language, even if it is sometimes a little difficult. At the same time, they realize that the life of other young people elsewhere in Canada may be very different in many ways like school schedules and popular sports activities for example. "

Video project submitted by Thomas Dumont here:

https://www.dropbox.com/sh/5ohfzif1q6gb4mk/AABzwQFNZrnqz-lwF9_aFfiWa?dl=0

All supporting materials including logos, graphics, and youth projects can be accessed here:

https://www.dropbox.com/sh/346uz8a2qx9hr5g/AACKo_d8NCif_xWHCzCuBTb4a?dl=0