**Vibrant Communities**
TAMARACK INSTITUTE ‖‖ ENDING POVERTY
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CASE STUDY

# CASE STUDY | A squad of young tech tutors responds to the challenges of pandemic digital learning.

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The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted our daily lives in many ways. Parachuted into virtual learning, many students, teachers, and parents found themselves overwhelmed and lacking resources. The Regroupement lavallois pour la réussite éducative, as part of the Communities Building Youth Futures (CBYF) initiative, developed a project to respond to these pressing needs. The following is a look back at the project.



## INTRODUCTION

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Quebec went into lockdown overnight. Work-from-home was enforced for most professionals, daycares were closed, and schools and educational institutions sent their students into digital learning mode. Teachers and staff had to rely on resourcefulness and ingenuity to pivot into virtual classrooms and provide online instruction. Although technology is central to our daily lives, many households found themselves strained by these new measures.

Amid the crisis, the Regroupement lavallois pour la réussite éducative (RLPRE) recognized a glaring need: to offer technological assistance to support students in their new homeschooling reality. Some families lacked access to a computer, a desk, or enough internet bandwidth to meet the entire family's needs, and beyond that, knowledge and data around online learning was lacking. Students needed help to get organized for at-home studies.

The "Jeunes branchés : Escouade numérique" service was thus created. Its mission: to provide real-time technological support services *for* youth, *by* youth. The squad was made up of 8 members, each trained to act as a "tech tutor" for other youth. The service developed and launched a website as well as several communication channels for students to reach out to the squad.

## SERVICES OFFERED

5 service orientations:
- Equipment
- Connection
- Platforms
- Organization
- Motivation

5 support types:
- Online links and references
- Videos and tutorials
- Informational documents
- Connections to online resources (secondary, college, adult education, professional training)
- Real-time access to tutor squad

1 squad: 5 ways to contact them
- Telephone
- Chat message
- Videoconference
- Appointment
- Social media (mainly Instagram and Discord)

## About the Squad

The squad was made up of high school and college students who act as technology tutors to answer questions, troubleshoot, refer, or accompany students in online learning (full-time or in hybrid mode). Any student in the Laval school system could connect with the squad and ask questions.

*Jeunes branchés* is not a professional technical support service. Its services are offered as a complement to the support and programs offered in the Laval schools. Our tutors were delighted to help to the best of their ability and knowledge.

> **The squad's availability and accessibility really distinguish this project. These are young people interested and involved in helping other young people with virtual learning.**

## RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING

The youth selected as members of the tech squad all participated in a recruitment process.

The recruitment process focused primarily on youth in Secondary 5. They were contacted through the Animateurs de vie spirituelle et d'engagement communautaire (AVSEC) for the Laval schools who promoted the project and played a key role in identifying the best potential candidates.

For the majority of the high school students, this was their first real participation in a job selection process. Each youth was required to write a resume, send a statement of motivation, and complete a questionnaire. All candidates who completed these initial steps were given a virtual one-on-one interview. 25 youth were interviewed.

We also worked with 3 college students to prepare the squad's training and create and edit the video clips.

Limonade Stratégies provided training for each tutor on website and mobile application management, on Wix, which helped them be comfortable with the online appointment booking system, phone system, and making additions and edits to the information on the website.

Limonade Stratégies also offered a training on social media management including content pillar development, visual creation, and publication programming. The tutors were then as autonomous as possible with digital marketing.

In addition, the squad created several documents and guides for managing IT and technical requests and established customer service protocols, which proved to be useful problem-solving tools during tutoring.

## NETWORKING AND ROLLOUT

The project's fundamental idea was to respond to a new and unexpected need. The RLPRE wanted to quickly gauge the interest and needs of key stakeholders in the field, relying on its experience and contacts within the community and school systems. Several connections were made to disseminate the service and ensure its adaptation. The following partners played a key role in the project:

- Collège Montmorency and Carrefour jeunesse-emploi de Laval (CJE): for the creation and promotion of a series of video clips entitled: "Les capsules mode d'emploi pour réussir tes cours à distance!" (How-to video clips to succeed in your distance learning courses!). These video clips helped students with best practices for working and studying from home. The partners had the necessary equipment to design and edit the videos for the *Jeunes branchés* YouTube channel.
- École virtuelle: There was a real interest in the squad tutors accompanying new registrants during the 15-day period between their registration and the actual start of their courses. In collaboration with management and the specialized educators, we began to establish a list of specific difficulties encountered by previous virtual school cohorts and explored where we could provide interventions, training, and coaching.
- The Centre de services scolaire de Laval development officers played an important role in disseminating and promoting the project in the schools.
- The "Mes outils techno" platform at the Centre de services scolaire de Laval: The *Jeunes branchés* services were promoted across platforms by their digital integration pedagogical advisor.
- The "Support technologique Étudiants-FGA" platform at the Centre de services scolaire de Laval: The *Jeunes branchés* services were promoted across platforms by their digital integration pedagogical advisor.
- The "TIC FP FGA Laval Élèves" platform at the Centre de services scolaire de Laval: The *Jeunes branchés* services were promoted across platforms by their digital integration pedagogical advisor.
- The Laval libraries: The goal of the library partnership was to enable young people to have access to spaces and tools to continue their studies online, when government restrictions allowed it. Young people who went to libraries to reserve a workplace and/or a computer did not need to be members. A schedule was available in advance to reserve time slots.
- Carrefour jeunesse-emploi de Laval (CJE): CJE users had access to dedicated computer stations during pre-scheduled time slots.
- Youth Centres and Community Centres: We explored the possibility of using their spaces during deconfinement to provide a well-equipped working environment (notably, computers) to carry out classes or complete homework. In addition, they played a role promoting the service.
- Promotional posters were placed in several schools and community organizations.

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The Laval School Service Centre publicized our service on various platforms. Additionally, we held several meetings with ICT experts, digital pedagogical advisors, and other school stakeholders.

## Social Media

We also used social media to advertise and promote our services. We were active on the following platforms, with 3-4 publications per week.
- Facebook
- Instagram
- Discord

Facebook was used primarily to reach parents and organization stakeholders. Posts were targeted for a more adult audience. Instagram content was targeted more at youth. The posts were created by squad members and were primarily focused on motivation and information about our services. The Discord platform was very active, maintained daily by squad members to always ensure a consistent presence and warm welcome.

## TIMELINE

### Adapting to public health regulations

In response to the low number of applications received in spring 2021, the project was put on hold for the summer, with the plan to resume service at the beginning of the school year. We were confident that the public health situation would continue to evolve, and that support would be needed.

In August 2021, we learned that the school year would begin with in-person learning in September 2021 and that masks would be required. This was demoralizing news for the squad who had hoped to resume services at full capacity at the beginning of the school year. We thus decided to adapt tasks and maintain certain service offerings:
- Personalized online tutoring
- Tutoring service availability in community organizations
- Reorganization of the squad's weekly tasks

We also made the decision to appoint one of the team members as a "team leader," giving him additional work experience and responsibility. This role took on the daily tasks of team and workload management and time sheets.

Then in January 2022, when students reverted to virtual learning, *Jeunes branchés* was already in place and well publicized. Requests for help poured in during the first four days back at school. The favorable timing at last allowed us to observe that the squad's services were indeed an adequate response to a

very real need. We were surprised to see that most requests for support came from parents of elementary school children, even though the advertising campaign had been aimed more at high school, vocational training, and college students.

## Challenges and learnings

The feedback we received from project partners, organizations, and allies was always the same: there is a very real and unmet need. However, our offer did not reach the target audience as intended and was never used to its full potential.

We recognize that communicating directly with teachers would have been the most beneficial. The most direct and effective way to promote student services would have been through the teachers themselves. The teachers were left with the added burdens of managing technology and new platforms, while also trying to teach their students how to use them. With greater knowledge of our service, the teachers would have been able to directly refer students in need.

In addition, several months passed between the start of online learning and the service being operational. The needs identified in the initial assessment had time to evolve. The youth consequently found their own strategies to adapt to their new reality as best they could. We are confident that earlier access to this service would have led to better solutions, improved tools, and more effective strategies.

Lastly, the project functioned in a continual reaction mode and was often faced with bad timing. We needed to adapt constantly to new health measures, new social constraints, new school strategies, new student needs, and all while working remotely ourselves. This required rethinking and redirection throughout the project, which demanded a great deal of energy and availability from the team. We believe that had the project started at the beginning of the pandemic, the service would have been much more used, as was the case last January.

## RESULTS

The project's principal accomplishments include:

- Training a team of 8 young tech tutors (+ financial contribution paid to the tutors for 7 months, which offered them excellent work-study conditions).
- Creation of a logo, creation, and implementation of a website (which connected to a variety of tech resources for youth), creation of social media accounts, and offering various communication channels with tutors
- Supported two young female entrepreneurs who had just started their business and were hired from March 2021 to January 2022 to coordinate the project
- Developed tools and content, including video clips, for student users
- Developed tools, worksheets, support, and personalized coaching for tutors
- Creation of 3 workshops on cyber citizenship and cyber responsibility for youth
- The project was presented at the national CBYF gathering, organized by Tamarack, and featured one of the youth tutors in the panel discussion.
- The squad served 50 youth (some via connection with parents) and 6 community partners to

address technical, motivational, or organizational difficulties at school
- 2 tutors provided one-on-one tutoring, online and in person, for one high school student
- 27 documents and tools were developed as part of the project
- The project will be taken over by two of the squad tutors who will continue to build out the current service offerings

## Analysis from the Coordination Team

The commitment of the squad members and the project's positive impact on their lives was a major area of success. The project ultimately did not reach as many young people as we hoped, and we did not receive as many requests as anticipated. Bad timing often wrecked havoc on our plans. However, we formed, maintained, and bonded a team of 8 fantastic young people. We had the privilege of working with engaged and motivated youth. These were students who care about doing a good job, who are invested in their tasks, and who respect their commitments. It was a great opportunity to witness a team's development. From 8 strangers, they became 8 friends who supported and accompanied each other throughout the project and beyond. For us, most particularly in these difficult times when young people need to feel connected and supported, this is quite an achievement.

## Impact on the Squad Members



We are happy to share these testimonials, direct from the squad members, on their experiences with the project:

"*Jeunes branchés* allowed me to learn more about technology and gain new experiences. I was able to get comfortable on several platforms by completing trainings at the beginning of the project and over time, I developed many new skills.

The project and its purpose were very interesting. The development was well done, despite the bad timing we had. Everything came together well - the site, the Discord server, the Instagram posts. It was also a job I enjoyed doing; it wasn't stressful, and I came to work with peace of mind.

*Jeunes branchés* will always be a big part of my life. I consider the team a family - we got to know each other well while working together. I have enjoyed my journey with this project, and I hope to see it succeed in the future, even though the original squad is no longer together."

- Maria Laghmari

"I would say that this project allowed me and the other tutors to help youth in a way that was really of-

the-moment. The team's diverse qualities allowed us to provide a comprehensive yet still accessible service. Every member's passion and autonomy, from the beginning of the project, made being part of the team really enjoyable. Also, it was an experience that will help us in our future job or school applications."

- Saïd Hamdane

"To capture it in a few words, *Jeunes branchés* allowed me to put my research skills to good use, whether it was in creating the Discord or my role in creating the website! What I remember most is the incredible organization of the whole group, without which we probably wouldn't have gotten this far!"

- Rayane Feraoun

"I really loved working with *Jeunes branchés*. The team members, leaders, and the atmosphere were motivating. I learned a lot about building a business through this pilot project. From day one right up to the final product, it was an experience not to be missed. We started with very little but ended up with a working website, an organized Discord platform, and a dedicated team. To sum it up, I can say it was the best work experience I've had."

- Nejib Soussi

## Learnings on youth engagement and motivation

*Jeunes branchés* relied primarily on our team of 8 tutors. We felt it was essential to involve them quickly and extensively in the project to maximize their engagement. Below are some of our takeaways around maintaining their motivation and commitment:

**Successes**

- Weekly team meetings: We initially held weekly team meetings to provide updates, assign tasks, discuss, and have fun.
- Tasks aligned with their interests: We assigned them tasks that they were interested in and that they enjoyed doing.
- Working in pairs: Working in teams was much more productive and enjoyable for them.
- Team building: We put a lot of emphasis on and nurtured the bond between them. They forged friendships and it was important to have fun during our meetings.
- Timely follow-up from the coordinating team: Our team of tutors could quickly and easily reach the coordination team, which helped build a sense of trust.
- Flexible schedule: The tutors appreciated being able to adapt their hours to their school schedule.
- Trust: It was important for us to trust them, to give them autonomy, and the youth repeatedly mentioned how much this space and trust were appreciated.

**Challenges**

- Change in coordination: Although the youth identified this change as positive, they had to rebuild their trust and adapt to a new management style.

- Working and meeting remotely: Virtual engagement brought its share of difficulties. On many occasions, a youth was unable to connect due to a technical problem. It is also more difficult to build team spirit in virtual mode.
- Challenge of working autonomously: While the autonomy granted was generally appreciated, it was difficult for some of the team members to be so independent. Some tutors would have benefited from more sustained and regular support.
- Numerous changes of plans: The squad team was motivated and committed. However, the many changes in direction and goals gradually wore down their motivation. The original project goal was not easily achieved, and it was consequently not easy to realign, explain, motivate, and keep the team members engaged. We felt the group's enthusiasm slowly diminish. These numerous adaptations and changes also required a great deal of energy from them.
- Ending routine team meetings: It suddenly became more and more difficult for the squad to meet every week. Was this a sign of lack of motivation? Perhaps, but in any case, it had an impact. From that point on, the tutors seemed less cohesive and engaged.
- Break in service: Following the service pause over the summer, it was difficult to regain the same level of commitment. Some remained motivated throughout the project, but it required more effort than if the project had been ongoing.

## CONCLUSION

Our initial plan was to launch *Jeunes branchés* - with financial support from the Tamarack Institute and Employment and Social Development Canada, as well as the support of the Regroupement lavallois pour la réussite éducative - and then pass the torch to another organization who would continue and expand the service offerings to bridge the digital divide at a broader level. We anticipated high demand for the services and many possibilities for community hand-over and service continuity. Things did not go as planned, and the project seemed likely to come to an end upon the conclusion of its funding in December 2021. Or so it seemed…

We explained the situation to the squad members at our last team meeting and several tutors expressed interest in taking over the service. They wanted specifically to continue to maintain the website and offer online support. We then discussed the financial implications and the support available from different actors in the field. Their interest in taking over the service demonstrated their deep commitment towards the project, as well as how they gained and integrated skills that will allow them to pursue the project's mission independently.

The story has a happy ending: Pavel and Maria, two tutors from the squad, decided to take over the project and continue offering the services. For once, the timing was excellent, as the return to virtual learning in January 2022 brought a surge of requests, and the two young tutors were more than ready to help. In the medium term, Pavel and Maria also intend to expand their service offering to provide even more help and support to students, including academic tutoring and support for transitions between grade levels. In this way, *Jeunes Branchés* also fostered two budding entrepreneurs who will offer new services for young Laval residents and help them achieve their academic goals! We wish *Jeunes Branchés* 2.0 a fantastic launch and much continued success.

And finally, it's important to remember that we sometimes find success where we least expect to! And that, in and of itself, is a good thing.

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*The opinions and interpretations included in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada.*