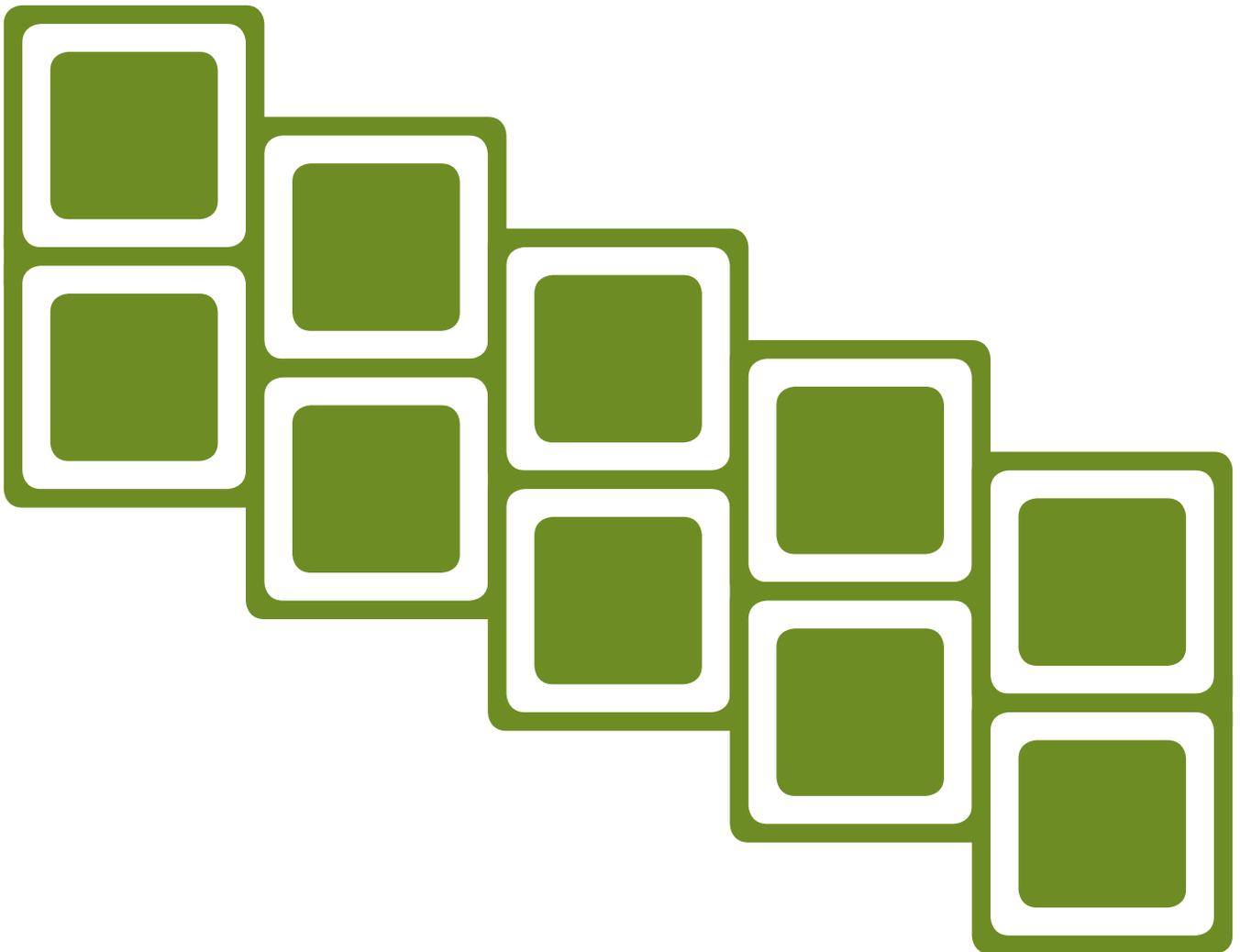


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The Explore Program at the Université de Montréal: The Story of a Passport

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Acknowledgments I would first and foremost like to thank all members of my team; each member puts their heart and soul into the success of the Explore program each summer. I would also like to thank all our partners at the Université de Montréal; each of them has always worked hand in hand with us in order to offer the best experience to our students. Special thanks also go to the Official Languages Program team in Toronto, whose dedication and organizational skills make it possible for the program to flourish. Last, but not least, I would like to express my deepest appreciation to Danielle Cossette, the Quebec coordinator of the Explore program, for her tireless energy and sustained guidance throughout the different steps of the program creation every year.

Abstract

Explore is a 5-week intensive language-immersion program. This Canadian program provides learners from all provinces with the opportunity to learn one of the country's official languages (French or English), whilst exploring a new region and living an authentic language-learning experience. Every year, around 450 Canadian students choose the Université de Montréal as their destination to learn French during the month of July. This paper presents various aspects of the Explore program as it is structured at the Université de Montréal, namely, the context of learning, the procedures for enrollment, programming, and the reasons for its resounding success. It also presents the challenges of receiving a group as big as 450 learners, as well as problems related to the organization of various events and activities, along with the solutions to ensure a positive and productive learning experience for our students.

Résumé

Explore est un programme intensif d'immersion linguistique d'une durée de 5 semaines. Ce programme canadien permet à des étudiants de toutes les provinces de découvrir une nouvelle région tout en apprenant une des langues officielles du pays : le français ou l'anglais. C'est ainsi que chaque été, environ 450 étudiants canadiens choisissent l'Université de Montréal pour apprendre le français durant le mois de juillet. Cet article décrit le programme Explore tel qu'il est offert à l'Université de Montréal. Nous y présentons des aspects divers : le contexte de l'apprentissage, les procédures d'admission et d'inscription, la programmation pédagogique et socioculturelle, ainsi que les raisons du succès retentissant du programme. Les défis liés à la réception simultanée de 450 apprenants, ainsi que ceux liés à l'organisation des activités y sont expliqués, de même que les solutions qui nous permettent d'offrir à nos étudiants une expérience d'apprentissage positive et productive.

Understanding the Context

Université de Montréal (UdeM) is considered a major francophone university, not only in North America but also globally because of its average annual enrollment of 66,899 students as well as its cadre of 2,644 professors and researchers. The size of the student body makes it the largest university in Quebec and the second largest in Canada. When ranking is considered, it comes third in Canada as a research university and occupies the 103th place in the prestigious *Times Higher Education* (UdeM, 2016).

The École de langues (Language School) is a unit that functions within the Faculté de l'éducation permanente (Faculty of Continuing Education), and it is dedicated to the teaching and learning of French and English as second languages (FSL and ESL). The École de langues receives around 4,000 students each year, and annually these students generate approximately 7,500 course registrations. The various programs of the École de langues run all year long, and they are offered as credit as well as non-credit courses. The programming can be tailored to learners' specific needs in order to optimize learning experiences.¹

The Explore program has been offered by the École de langues at UdeM since the 1970s; it is a Canada-wide intensive immersion experience, administered by the Council of Ministers of Education of Canada, funded by the Department of Canadian Heritage, and coordinated by the Official Languages Program (OLP) team.² Throughout Canada, many universities and colleges are part of the Explore program; some offer it in English while others offer it in French. Each of these institutions has its own annual quota (ranging from 50 to 550 students). Those universities decide whether to offer the bursary program in summer or in spring, or both, and whether the courses will be credit or non-credit courses.

1 For more information about École de langues see École de langues (French) or <https://translate.google.ca/translate?hl=en&sl=fr&u=http://ecoledelangues.umontreal.ca/&prev=search> (English)

2 The OLP team is responsible for the coordination of the official-languages programs at the pan-Canadian level. The team is responsible for the overall administration of the programs across the country, as well as the implementation of various projects that contribute to the proper management of the programs. The official description of this program can be found online at <http://www.myexplore.ca/en/>

The Explore Program at the Université de Montréal



Students

Montreal is a favorite destination for the Explore students. The UdeM welcomes 400 to 450 participants on its main campus (only students over the age of 18 are accepted, and they live, study, and socialize as a cohort during the 5-week program). Their journey starts when they apply for a bursary on the Explore official website, wait for the lottery draw³ to be held by the Official Languages Team, then confirm with their acceptance of the invitation. The bursary covers tuition fees for the course, instructional materials, meals, accommodation, and most of the activities, and it is paid directly to the host institution.⁴

Seven levels of language-culture competency are offered at the École de langues for the Explore program (low, intermediate, and high). Courses provide 6 UdeM credits and are based on an interactive and communicative approach, with an emphasis on oral skills. Learners can practice speaking French in class, in afternoon workshops, and during sociocultural activities (see Figure 1). A reward system, using BRAVO⁵ coupons, is put in place to highlight students' efforts in using the target language. Students can use these tickets to win prizes such as an iPad, or French social outings.

3 For more information about the lottery-draw, visit <http://www.myexplore.ca/en/page/?draw>

4 The infographics at the following link provide further information about the Explore bursary <http://www.myexplore.ca/data/documents/00000016.jpeg>

5 These coupons are developed and printed by the Explore program.



Figure 1: The Communicative Approach

Students are expected to complete a minimum of 50 hours of workshops and activities, in addition to the course itself. Their participation in this part of the program is an important element of the grading scheme of the course. On the first day of their stay, they receive a “passport” divided into 5 weeks. Each time they participate in an activity or a workshop, they get a stamp as proof of their presence and active participation. At the end of the 5-week stay, students receive points equivalent to the number of learning hours that have been accumulated outside of the classroom. These points are added to their final course grade.

During workshops, students are encouraged to participate in various language activities aimed at developing their competency in using the oral skills in a relaxed environment. Language leaders are asked to adapt the workshop according to the language level of the students.

Numerous sociocultural activities are offered at different times during the 5-week session; most of these activities are free of charge and provide students with different opportunities to discover francophone culture in Montreal and Quebec. They include visits to museums, tours of famous neighborhoods, movie nights, and visits to major attractions, such as the Biodôme, le Jardin botanique, etc. Plays and other interactive talent shows are organized at least twice during the session, as well as a discovery trail and various sporting events. Students can also join one of the trips to Quebec City and discover yet other features of “La Belle Province.”

All students are housed in single rooms in the university residences, Les Studios Hôtel, which are within easy walking distance of the classrooms. For breakfast and lunch, Monday through Friday, they are issued food coupons for use in the university cafeteria. For all other meals, a reasonable amount of money is deposited in their personal bank account. Cooking facilities are also available within their residence hall.

Planning

Each year, the École de langues team start planning the Explore program in March. By June, almost all of the members of the administrative team are fully engaged with organizing the program. The coordinator of the sociocultural activities, the coordinator of the credit courses, and two clerical staff.

The coordinator of the non-credit courses and the French programs leader are also involved at least 50% of their time. During July, Explore becomes the major occupation for all the administrative team of the French section at the École de langues. Typically, 22 to 24 unionized instructors are appointed for each session, as well as 16 to 18 language leaders. Two additional office workers are also hired to help with the daily routine of the program.

Three Pillars for the Success of Explore

To us, having the opportunity to offer a program such as Explore is an important privilege and, at the same time, a huge responsibility. A successful implementation of this program entails developing the sense of an inclusive community, creating a secure environment, and offering positive learning experiences to all participants in the program. More specifically, we have a history of continually identifying, examining, and strengthening the three pillars that contribute to achieving the set goal.

Enhanced Means of Communication

The first pillar that ensures program success is good communication, by means of a variety of tools. First, we make sure that information is posted properly and in a timely manner on the UdeM website. This information gives students an overview of UdeM's Explore immersion experience before they join the program. Second, once all participants from across Canada are selected, we send each participant a complete orientation package that contains detailed information about the various aspects of the stay. Third, we invite them to confirm their acceptance and ask them to join a closed community on Facebook. This platform on social media, managed by one of our coordinators, allows students to ask questions, share answers and suggestions, and even plan their trip together. For example, those who are flying from Calgary on the same day may decide to share a taxi to reach the university. To make communication even easier, we encourage participants to communicate by phone or by email with "Infolang," our live information desk. We make sure that they receive answers to their questions within 24 hours.

When they arrive on site, participants benefit from an additional range of communication tools. First, we offer face-to-face communication with participants. They can access the Explore program headquarters (*la permanence*) from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Coordinators and language leaders welcome them; answer their questions; and guide them through the campus, the various services, and their new learning environment.

Second, we hold three general assemblies throughout their stay. The first two are aimed at launching the program and introducing the extended team to the participants. We explain the rules related to the students' safety and those related to the use of the target language, and create a sense of community that is essential to program success. The third assembly takes place in the middle of the program and is aimed at celebrating the successes of our students, raising their morale, and reminding them of the importance of following the given guidelines.

Third, as soon as students arrive to join the program, we introduce them to a main source of information, the *Info Français* magazine (in paper format), and encourage them to read and share information. This magazine provides information about the highlights of the coming week, the cafeteria menu, and the sociocultural activities. As a follow-up activity, our language leaders go to each classroom and explain the content to all students using the French language along with gestures and pictures to make sure that participants understand the conveyed messages.

Finally, we invite students in each class to elect a representative within the first few days of starting the program. The representatives participate in weekly meetings and report their classmates' questions, worries, and suggestions. Throughout the session, whenever the need arises, messages might also be relayed to classes via the student center.

Once the Explore session is completed and participants head back to their home province(s), they are informed that the Facebook space will stay open for them to share their final comments or questions, thereby keeping the communication channels open among them. They are also encouraged to communicate through Infolang any time they want and to seek answers to questions they might have. They are assured they will receive an official transcript of their marks from the Bureau du Registraire in September.

Enhanced communication is also established among the team members of the program. For that purpose, we physically move a part of the École de langues to offices situated within the building where all courses are given. This gives teachers as well as students and language leaders access to information and resources easily and in a timely manner. In addition, the administrative team meets daily to exchange information, plan effectively for the next day or week, and resolve any emerging problems. All partners who contribute to the success of the program—university residence personnel, cafeteria personnel, security services personnel—are invited to a meeting every Monday morning for the purpose of sharing information and planning future activities.

Shared Sense of Responsibility

The second pillar for success concerns the establishment of a shared sense of responsibility between students, staff, instructors, and administrations. For this purpose, four elements are considered:

- students' perceptions and misconceptions about the program or the learning environment,
- participants' level of motivation and engagement,

- safety issues,
- problem prevention.

For example, as soon as we start communicating with students, we make clear the purpose and the importance of the bursary. We emphasize the fact that the Explore bursary aims at providing selected students with an equal opportunity to study a second language, discover a new Canadian region and culture, and share ideas in a stimulating environment. For this, the target language is to be used at all times, and the institutions' guidelines are to be followed. Luckily enough, the vast majority of participants in our program fully understand the purpose of this experience and appreciate the opportunity to meet other people from all over Canada, whilst improving their communication skills in the target language.

We caution students not to become overly distracted by the many attractions of Montreal beyond the campus. Montreal is an interesting city filled with members of diverse ethno-linguistic backgrounds, and there is a strong temptation for students to speak their mother tongue (English). The students are also drawn to the vibrant Montreal nightlife. We draw their attention to the fact that, as adults, they need to make the effort to fulfill the rigorous requirements of an academic course, while still taking advantage of the various attractions of Montreal.

Obviously, creating a safe and proactive environment for the Explore community is one of our main priorities, and all our actions are guided by a sense of urgency in getting ahead of the challenges, anticipating possible barriers, and finding appropriate solutions. Such precautionary procedures help prevent misunderstanding of the context and program goals, misuse of resources, or disruption of the learning environment. On their part, the students are expected to demonstrate responsible conduct at all times. This means that bullying, harassment, partying in public spaces, and dangerous conduct are prohibited and could result in an immediate dismissal from the program. That is why a code of honor is sent to the students with the initial package of information. They are asked to sign and return it along with the other documents they are required to provide.

Reinforced Intercultural Understanding

The third pillar for success resides in one of the most distinguishing traits of the program: the cultural diversity of its students. Explore brings people together from all the different provinces of Canada, including Canadian students from abroad. In fact Canadians comprise a cosmopolitan body of individuals, and diversity is an advantage and an opportunity for people to discover other ways of thinking and behaving. The word "culture" in the context of this paper is used to reflect the broader spectrum that includes all kinds of characteristics of the various social groups, be they related to ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, etc. We are fully aware that the dynamic created when all these social groups interact in a Francophone culture are very interesting and worth observing and analyzing while dealing with the daily routine of the Explore program.

One of our main objectives is to help students develop a positive attitude toward francophone culture in Quebec, while nurturing their individual and social growth. An immersion experience of this sort brings many challenges to students, since they have to adapt quickly to a new learning environment and develop the competency of sharing collective norms and behaviors related to the program. We are aware that those life skills that students develop and use during Explore can be bolstered if the affect factors related to second language acquisition are catered to. Thus, creating a learning environment that fosters motivation, self-esteem, risk-taking, and empathy is essential. Our teachers, language leaders, and coordinators are trained to use the best available tools to maximize students' motivation and reduce their anxiety. Accommodations are made whenever needed, and students are encouraged to inform us of any learning difficulty or personal challenge they face. Special arrangements and services are negotiated with those students in order to make sure that their needs are fulfilled.

It Takes a Village!

Each year, Explore bursary recipients are invited to fill in a questionnaire at the end of the session. The results of this survey over the last 3 years showed that 93% of our students were either satisfied or highly satisfied with their stay at UdeM. The Explore program cannot be operated without the collaboration of all stakeholders. Sharing the same dedication for the program is important, as is understanding the ins and outs of this immersion experience. Excellent organization and competent staff members are essential. Teachers in the Explore credit courses are all highly experienced and have a Master's degree in teaching French as a second language. Language leaders are usually chosen for their experience in organizing and facilitating activities, and for their ability to deal with students of different origins. Many of these language monitors are university students specializing in the domain of language teaching and learning. Forging partnerships and maintaining quality relations with university services, such as cafeteria, residences, and security, is essential. Each year, we go to great lengths to make sure that connections are re-established and nurtured, because we know that every detail is important for the continued success of such a program.

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Biography

R. Biba Fakhouri is the director of the School of Languages at the Université de Montréal. She holds a Master's degree in human and social sciences—diffusion of the French language. Her areas of interest and professional activity include but are not limited to curriculum evaluation and design, teacher training, learning communities, and international outreach.