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How We (a Sustainable Youth Tour Operator) Went Digital

March 2020 now seems like a lifetime ago. The whole world was blindsided by an invisible enemy that disrupted everything and restricted the freedoms we all took for granted. For CAS Trips, the ramifications changed everything.

Shocked by the rapid global shut-down, we spent the first weeks of the pandemic canceling trips booked for 2350 students from 57 countries.

Heartbreakingly, the largest of those endeavors, Prague Spring, was only two weeks from its scheduled start. This 2-month long celebration of international education invites hundreds of 16 to 18-year-old international students from every corner of the globe to join together in dynamic volunteer challenges with local charities and NGOs.

With this experience gone in a flash, we, like so many international schools around the world, knew students were craving international dialogue amid the global lockdown, maybe even more than ever. We quickly realized that our best option to maintain our student-focused mission was to take it virtual.

Pivoting to Virtual

For the past six years, we have spent every day working to harness the power of travel to inspire students to be more. Within a couple of weeks, that mission statement was made redundant.



But it was not a time to sit idly by and wallow in what was lost. The basis of our philosophy was as relevant, if not more relevant than it had ever been. And with the recent developments in video conferencing technology, there was no reason we could not continue connecting students, communities, and organizations from all around the globe with the common goal of making a positive impact.

Thus, the team began our research and planning in earnest. Weekly brainstorming sessions led our team through the tough Spring as we each presented creative solutions to one central question:

How can CAS Trips adapt while engaging students?

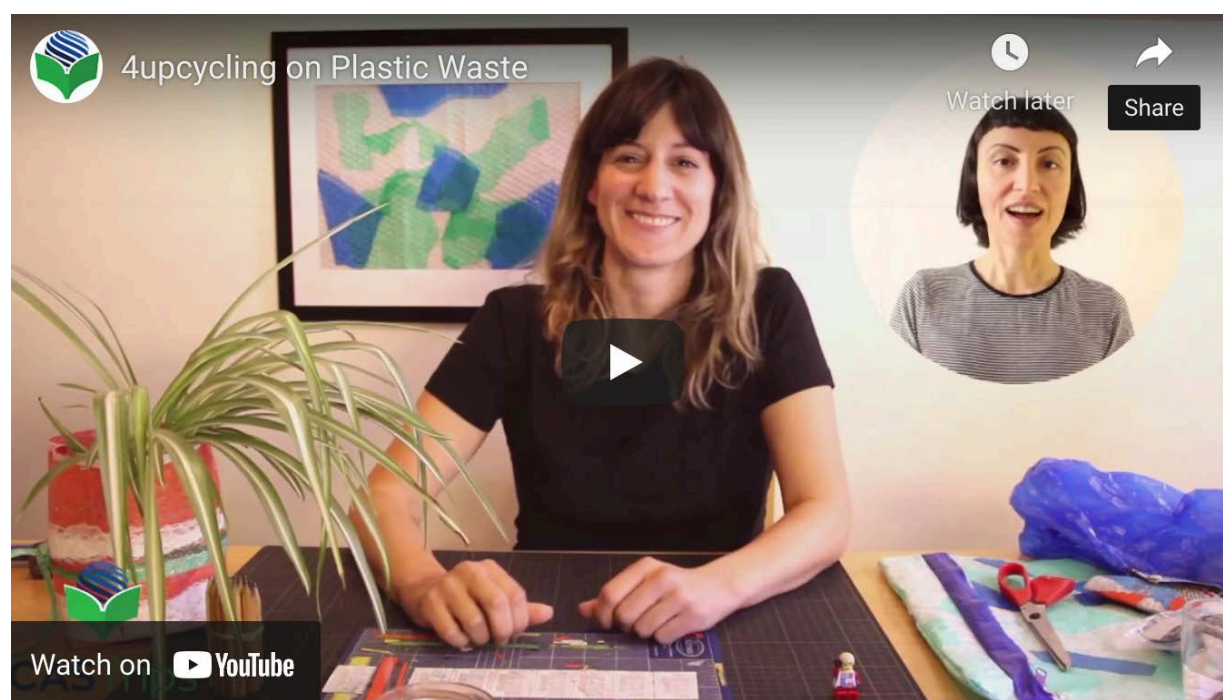
Our first brainstorm covered a philosophy central to every CAS Trip: Service. How could we utilize technology to inspire meaningful service, aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals? We quickly saw our ideas begin to take shape into reality.



Like many others, we were wary of potential pitfalls in our first foray into the digital world, but we agreed to push ahead with a suggestion of mine to lead online live-streams with live keynote speakers and involved student participation. After a rapid product design process, we quickly launched our first online student challenge, the Waste Reduction Challenge, to take place across the month of May.

Virtual, Sustainable Education

Our first ‘at home’ student challenge covered waste reduction topics ranging from food to fashion in 5 weeks of live streams, with students invited to follow our thematic curriculum and submit photos of their own waste reduction creations. Unique and inspiring student submissions were shared each week, showcasing to everyone involved just how creative the youth of today are. So much so, that we awarded a top submission with an invitation to participate in our 2021 Global Student Conference!

It was a pleasure to invite speakers from Bye Bye Plastic Bags, UN World Food Programme, Salterbaxter, and Fridays for Future to contextualize the weekly themes discussed.





Furthermore, we felt it was our duty to support the local partner organizations who are active in the communities in which we travel. Many of whom got involved with our challenge by putting together instructional videos for sustainability projects at home!

Looking back on what we provided for students does make us proud. What began as a response to the travel restrictions further developed into meaningful educational resources still available for teachers to use in their classroom. To support educators amid the global lockdowns we published our popular CAS at Home blogs, and are currently expanding on our CAS resources with our CAS Shorts video series while continuing to share new online service opportunities for students monthly!

Doing our best to act as an educational resource through the difficult lockdown period opened new virtual doors for us, without even boarding a plane.

Non-profit Partnerships for Service


As perpetual champions of responsible tourism, CAS Trips has constantly developed partnerships with pioneering local NGOs to lead the service experiences students participate in. So as the 2020–21 school year began in August, our team once again focused on the impact we could have in the virtual world, as developing community-focused experiences for our international audience became our new challenge.



Having spoken to hundreds of anxious coordinators, the one message we heard time and time again was the need for students to connect with one another, share their experiences, and collaborate to make a genuine difference.

Our inaugural regional conference series was designed to bring hundreds of students together to focus on producing solutions for a real-life issue presented by an NGO. So, with the Virtual CAS Conferences scheduled for Europe-Africa-Middle East, Asia-Pacific, and The Americas, the Charity Hackathon was born.

An intricate goal of this 2-day conference was to give the students the ability to discuss global issues presented by renowned Keynote speakers representing the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network and Climate Camp Scotland. In small-group breakout sessions, the students shared opinions with students of varying cultural backgrounds and got to know each other in preparation for the next day.

Day Two began with an introductory speech from the local charity who shared details of their organizations' mission, history, and operations; concluding with current issues they are facing due to the global pandemic. Teams of 3–6 students were then tasked to follow design thinking principles as they chose an issue to address and solve. With the winning proposal being chosen by the local charity to actually be enacted with \$1,000 funding provided by CAS Trips.





To keep our Charity Hackathon as tangible as possible, we partnered with an NGO based in each region the conference was held. Plastic Punch in Ghana, the Andean Alliance for Sustainable Development in Peru, and the Royal Society for Protection of Nature in Bhutan.

These grassroots organizations each operate in their communities to support the people and the environment they live in — and we are so thankful for the enthusiasm and insight they shared.

For me personally, developing these relationships was a highlight of our virtual year. While unable to travel, we were still able to connect with individuals who have the same eagerness to enable this generation of youth to get out there to make a difference!

Value in Virtual Educational Tourism

Naturally, CAS Trips looks forward to the day that learning through hands-on travel experiences will return. But throughout 2020, we have seen that meaningful engagement with real global issues is still possible online.

Our Virtual CAS Conferences gave students the opportunities to fulfill extracurricular hobbies and degree requirements, giving support to the development of future generations of global citizens.

To say that students took advantage of the opportunities presented to them would be an understatement. Passion, creativity, and innovation were undeniable in the 100+ proposals submitted in Charity Hackathons, evident in the winning projects. These young adults are harnessing the power of the internet to engage with real global issues, giving us great hope for the future.

So as borders reopen and international travel resumes, we will be forever appreciative of everything that has come from this challenging journey into the virtual world.

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