

## **BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: RURAL COMMUNITIES AS CO-EDUCATORS**

BY

**\*Vaishnavi Somani**

*Local Narratives, Bengaluru, India*

### **Abstract**

Experiential and community-engaged learning can extend education beyond institutional classrooms, while intercultural learning emphasizes meaningful engagement across cultural contexts. Yet international and rural immersion programmes can also reproduce unequal relationships when communities are positioned primarily as sites to observe, study, or “solve.” This practice-oriented paper introduces the Local Narratives approach to experiential learning, which positions rural communities as active co-educators. It explores how educators can design immersion experiences around exchange, reflection, local knowledge, and contribution, enabling learners to encounter communities as sources of knowledge rather than simply as destinations. A practical framework and adaptable design exercise are presented for educators working across international, community-engaged, and experiential learning contexts.

**Keywords:** experiential learning, community-based learning, rural education; intercultural learning, place-based education, community knowledge, international education, reflective practice.

### **1. Introduction**

Education does not take place only in classrooms. Students learn through the people they meet, the environments they encounter, the work they observe, the questions they ask, and the relationships they develop. A conversation with a farmer about changing rainfall patterns, a discussion with an artisan about sustaining a traditional craft, or a walk through a village market can introduce learners to forms of knowledge that may be difficult to access through textbooks alone.

This recognition has encouraged schools, universities, and educational organizations to develop experiential learning, international exchange, field-based education, community engagement, and place-based learning programmes. Such approaches seek to connect formal education with lived experience and to help learners understand the relationships between knowledge, culture, society, and the environment.

However, moving learning outside the classroom does not automatically change how education is organized. A student may leave a university campus and enter a rural community while the underlying relationship between learner and teacher remains unchanged. The visiting student continues to ask questions, collect information, take photographs, and interpret what they see, while community members are expected to provide experiences or explanations. The community becomes the location of learning without necessarily becoming a recognized source of educational authority.

This distinction matters particularly in international and rural immersion programmes. When learners visit communities with different economic circumstances, cultural practices, or livelihoods, the experience can reproduce unequal relationships. Local people may be represented as examples of poverty, tradition, resilience, or development rather than recognized as individuals

with expertise, aspirations, and knowledge of their own contexts. In some cases, community engagement can become a form of observation in which the learner gains an educational or personal benefit while the community has limited influence over what is taught, how it is represented, or what happens afterwards.

The central argument of this paper is that taking students into a community is not the same as making a community part of the educational process.

This paper introduces the Local Narratives approach to experiential learning, developed through community-based immersion programmes involving learners from India, Japan, Australia, and other contexts. The approach explores how local people, livelihoods, culture, ecology, and everyday knowledge can become part of a learning experience. Rather than treating communities simply as hosts, destinations, or subjects of study, it proposes recognizing them as active co-educators.

The paper is practice-oriented. Its purpose is not to claim that one programme or framework has been empirically proven to produce particular learning outcomes. Instead, it develops a practical approach that educators can adapt when designing international programmes, rural immersions, field experiences, school exchanges, university courses, and community-engaged learning.

The paper addresses three questions:

1. What changes when rural communities are understood as co-educators rather than destinations or subjects of study?
2. How can educators design community-based learning around exchange, local knowledge, reflection, and contribution?
3. What practical tools can educators use before, during, and after immersion to support meaningful intercultural learning?

The paper proceeds by discussing the limitations of conventional approaches to educational immersion, examining relevant educational

concepts, introducing the Local Narratives approach, and presenting a practical framework and workshop activity for educators.

## **2. Rethinking Learning Beyond the Classroom**

### **2.1 Experiential learning is more than exposure**

Experiential learning recognizes that knowledge develops through engagement with experience. Kolb (1984) describes learning as a process involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. This framework offers a useful way to understand how a field experience can become an opportunity for learning.

For example, students visiting a rural market may observe how goods are produced, priced, transported, and sold. Reflection may encourage them to examine their assumptions about informal economies, local entrepreneurship, and consumer behavior. Discussion can then connect these observations to concepts introduced in class, while subsequent assignments or projects allow students to apply their learning.

However, the presence of experience does not guarantee the quality of learning. Students can visit a place without questioning their assumptions. They can observe an activity without understanding its context. They can collect stories without examining how those stories are shaped by their own perspectives.

Dewey (1938) makes an important distinction between experience itself and educational experience. An experience becomes educational through its quality and its relationship to subsequent learning. An encounter that reinforces existing prejudices may have limited educational value, even if it is memorable.

For educators, this means that the design of an immersion programme must extend beyond the selection of destinations and activities. It must also consider what learners are invited to notice, whose explanations they encounter, how they

interpret what happens, and what opportunities they have to reconsider their initial understanding.

## **2.2 The problem with treating communities as destinations**

Educational travel often organizes learning around places: a village, a farm, a craft centre, a forest, a school, or a community enterprise. These locations can provide meaningful contexts for learning, but a place-based itinerary alone does not establish a community-centred pedagogy.

A programme might include visits to a farmer, artisan, fisher, or local entrepreneur while leaving the overall educational structure unchanged. The visiting institution defines the learning objectives, selects the activities, determines what questions will be asked, and evaluates what students learn. Local people may be invited to demonstrate their work or explain their lives, but they may have little influence over the learning process.

This can create a distinction between *learning about* a community and *learning with* a community.

Learning about a community may involve gathering information about its history, economy, culture, or social challenges. Learning with a community adds a relational dimension: learners encounter people as participants in knowledge creation, engage with their interpretations, and recognise that the community has its own priorities and purposes.

The distinction is not absolute. Learning about a place can be valuable, and observation can be an important educational method. The question is whether the educational design allows community members to influence the learning experience rather than merely appear within it.

A community-as-co-educator approach therefore requires educators to consider not only where students go, but also who shapes the learning, whose knowledge is recognized, and who benefits from the engagement.

## **2.3 The risk of deficit-based learning**

Community immersion can also reproduce deficit-based narratives. This occurs when a community is introduced primarily through what it lacks: infrastructure, money, technology, formal education, access to services, or opportunities.

Such challenges may be real and important. However, when they become the dominant lens through which a community is understood, learners may overlook its knowledge, capabilities, relationships, creativity, and internal diversity.

A village, for example, can be discussed only in terms of limited resources, or it can be examined as a place where people have developed knowledge of agriculture, ecology, craft production, food systems, entrepreneurship, and collective life. Neither account alone is sufficient. Responsible learning considers both local strengths and structural challenges without reducing people to either.

Deficit-based approaches also risk encouraging students to see themselves as problem-solvers arriving from outside. Learners may assume that they understand what a community needs before listening to the people who live there.

A more responsible approach begins with curiosity rather than diagnosis. It invites students to ask how people understand their own circumstances, what knowledge they have developed, what changes they desire, and what they want others to understand about their lives.

This does not prevent students from identifying social or environmental challenges. It changes the process through which those challenges are understood.

## **2.4 Community knowledge as educational knowledge**

Educational institutions recognise knowledge through established systems of curriculum, qualifications, textbooks, research, and professional expertise. Yet knowledge is also developed through practice, experience,

observation, relationships, and intergenerational learning.

A farmer may possess detailed knowledge of soil, seeds, seasonal variation, and local ecological change. An artisan may understand materials, techniques, design, customer preferences, and the economics of craft production. A fisher may understand marine conditions, weather patterns, resource availability, and changing livelihoods. A community organiser may know how trust, participation, and collective decision-making develop over time.

These forms of knowledge are not necessarily interchangeable with academic expertise. Nor should they be romanticised as universally accurate or free from disagreement. Rather, they offer perspectives that can complement formal education and invite learners to examine how knowledge is produced, transmitted, and valued.

Recognising communities as co-educators means making space for these forms of expertise within the learning design. Community members should be able to contribute explanations, challenge assumptions, identify relevant questions, and shape how their knowledge is represented.

This also requires educators to consider practical questions of consent, recognition, compensation, preparation, and reciprocity. The community's contribution should not be treated as an unlimited resource simply because it occurs outside a formal educational institution.

### **3. Conceptual Foundations**

The Local Narratives approach draws on several related educational ideas. These concepts provide a foundation for the practical framework presented in this paper.

#### **3.1 Experiential learning**

Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle helps educators connect direct experience with reflection, conceptual understanding, and subsequent application.

For community-based programmes, this suggests that a visit should not be designed as a standalone event. It should connect to questions learners can investigate, opportunities to interpret what they encounter, and activities that help them apply their understanding.

However, the process should not be reduced to a fixed sequence. Learning may develop through repeated encounters, unexpected conversations, disagreement, or questions that remain unresolved.

#### **3.2 Place-based education**

Place-based education involves learning within the social, cultural, ecological, and historical characteristics of a particular location. Rather than treating place as a neutral backdrop, it recognises that the context itself contributes to the educational experience.

Gruenewald (2003) argues for a critical approach to place-conscious education that considers the relationships between people, environments, culture, and power. This is useful for community-based immersion because it encourages educators to move beyond presenting a location as an attractive or unusual setting.

A village can become a learning environment for exploring agriculture, migration, local economies, biodiversity, cultural practices, and the relationships between rural and urban life. The educational questions emerge from the place and from the people who know it, rather than being imposed entirely from outside.

#### **3.3 Intercultural learning**

Intercultural learning involves examining how people interpret differences, communicate across contexts, and understand their own cultural assumptions. Deardorff (2006) emphasises attitudes such as respect, openness, and curiosity alongside knowledge, interpretation, and interaction.

In a community immersion, intercultural learning should not be limited to identifying customs or comparing visible cultural differences. It can also involve examining how assumptions about work, family, success, time, development, education, or community are shaped by the learner's own context.

For instance, a conversation about livelihood may prompt students to reconsider what they mean by economic success. A discussion about shared resources may encourage them to examine the relationship between individual responsibility and collective life. Such encounters are opportunities for inquiry, not evidence that one cultural context is inherently better than another.

### **3.4 Reflection and critical pedagogy**

Reflection allows learners to examine the relationship between their experiences and their assumptions. Freire (1970) emphasises the importance of dialogue and critical consciousness, challenging educational relationships in which learners are treated as passive recipients of knowledge.

Applied to community-based learning, this perspective raises questions about who defines the problem, who is allowed to explain it, and whose interpretation becomes authoritative.

A reflective discussion should therefore do more than ask students whether they enjoyed a visit. It can ask what surprised them, which assumptions were challenged, whose voices they heard, whose voices were absent, and what they may have misunderstood.

Reflection can also help learners recognise the limits of their knowledge. A short visit does not provide complete access to another person's experience. A single conversation cannot represent an entire community. Learning to recognise these limits is itself an important educational outcome.

### **3.5 From Concepts to Practice**

Together, these perspectives suggest that community-based experiential learning requires more than physical movement beyond the classroom. It involves a deliberate relationship between experience, local knowledge, dialogue, reflection, and application.

The Local Narratives approach translates these principles into a practical design framework. Its central premise is that educators should design not only the activities learners undertake, but also the relationships through which learning becomes possible.

## **4. The Local Narratives Approach**

### **4.1 From travel programme to experiential learning environment**

Local Narratives began as a way to connect travelers and students with places and people beyond conventional tourist itineraries. Through its community-based programmes, the organisation has developed an approach that treats villages, local livelihoods, cultural practices, and everyday environments as learning spaces.

The approach is built around a simple proposition: people and their knowledge should be central to the learning experience.

Instead of organising a programme exclusively around attractions, educators can design it around questions. How does a local food system work? What knowledge sustains a craft practice? How do communities understand ecological change? How do local enterprises create livelihoods? How do people define wellbeing, opportunity, or development?

These questions create opportunities for learners to engage with local people as practitioners and interpreters of their own contexts.

The approach has been used as a basis for experiential learning programmes involving Indian and international learners, including participants from Japan and Australia. Its activities may involve rural immersion, craft and

livelihood encounters, farming and food systems, environmental learning, conversations with local practitioners, institutional exchange, community projects, and structured reflection.

The purpose is not to present one uniform version of rural India. Each location has its own history, social relationships, knowledge, and priorities. The design should respond to these differences rather than treat communities as interchangeable examples.

#### **4.2 The guiding principles**

The Local Narratives approach is expressed through four guiding principles.

##### **People over Places**

A destination is not only a geographical location. It is a place shaped by people, relationships, knowledge, work, memory, and aspiration. The design should begin by asking whom learners will encounter and how those encounters will contribute to learning.

##### **Stories over Itineraries**

An itinerary specifies where learners will go. A learning journey also asks what questions they will explore and whose perspectives will help them understand the place. Stories and conversations can connect activities to the wider context of people's lives.

##### **Exchange over Consumption**

A community experience should not be treated as something learners simply consume. Meaningful engagement requires listening, dialogue, respect, and attention to reciprocity. Exchange does not imply that every interaction must produce equal or immediate benefits, but it does require educators to consider the interests and agency of all participants.

##### **Contribution over Extraction**

Learners may gain knowledge, confidence, relationships, or professional insight through community engagement. Educators should also consider what the programme contributes to the people and places involved. Contribution must be defined with community partners rather than assumed by visiting institutions.

These principles are intended to guide decisions throughout programme design, from the selection of learning partners to the way students are prepared, activities are facilitated, and outcomes are evaluated.

#### **4.3 Communities as co-educators**

In this approach, a co-educator is a person or group that actively contributes to shaping and facilitating learning through their knowledge, experience, practice, and interpretation.

A co-educator is not simply someone who is present during a visit or available to answer students' questions. Depending on the programme, community partners may help identify relevant themes, define learning questions, choose appropriate activities, facilitate conversations, challenge learners' assumptions, and assess whether the engagement was respectful and useful.

For example, an artisan may help design a session around materials, craft techniques, market changes, and the transmission of skills. A farmer may identify questions about seasonal decision-making, soil, food systems, and livelihood risks. A local environmental practitioner may help students investigate relationships between biodiversity, livelihoods, and conservation.

The educator's role changes in this model. Rather than controlling every explanation, the educator creates conditions for dialogue between learners and community knowledge holders. They provide context, support reflection, address power imbalances, and help connect experience to the formal learning objectives.

The community's role also changes. Local partners are recognised as contributors to the educational process, not merely as hosts who provide access to a location.

This model does not mean that every community member must become a teacher in the formal sense. Nor does it require every interaction to be structured as a lesson. It means recognising that educational knowledge can emerge through relationships and practices outside institutional classrooms.

#### **4.4 The Local Narratives learning sequence**

The practical learning sequence used in the Local Narratives approach is:

**Experience → Reflection → Interaction → Application → Impact**

The sequence offers a design aid rather than a validated learning theory or a guaranteed progression. Its stages are explained below.

##### **Stage 1: Experience**

Learners enter a context and engage with an activity, practice, or situation.

This might involve visiting a farm, exploring a local market, observing craft production, walking through a village, participating in a community activity, or examining a local environmental issue. The experience should have a clear educational purpose. Students should understand the questions they are exploring while remaining open to unexpected learning.

##### **Stage 2: Reflection**

Learners pause to examine what they noticed, what surprised them, and what assumptions influenced their interpretation.

Reflection can take place individually through journaling or collectively through guided discussions. It should invite questions rather than direct students towards a predetermined conclusion.

##### **Stage 3: Interaction**

Learners engage in dialogue with community members, practitioners, peers, and facilitators.

They can ask questions, compare interpretations, and hear perspectives that complicate their initial understanding.

Interaction should not be treated as an entitlement to community members' time or personal stories. It must be appropriate to the context and based on consent.

##### **Stage 4: Application**

Learners connect their understanding to a question, task, project, or decision. They might develop a case analysis, investigate a supply chain, compare food systems, propose a research question, or revise an existing assumption.

Application does not always require solving a community problem. It can involve developing a more informed interpretation or identifying questions that require further investigation.

##### **Stage 5: Impact**

Learners and educators examine what has changed, what has been produced, and what might happen next.

Impact may include a revised understanding, a learning resource, a research output, a new partnership, or a community-defined contribution. It should not be assumed merely because students report having enjoyed an experience or learned something new.

Where a programme claims community benefit, that benefit should be assessed with community partners. Student learning and community outcomes are related but distinct.

The sequence is intended to connect activities with interpretation and application while keeping the wider purpose of the programme visible.

#### **5. Designing a Community-as-Co-Educator Programme**

The following framework translates the Local Narratives approach into practical decisions educators can use when designing an immersion programme.

### **5.1 Before immersion: prepare learners and partners**

Preparation begins before students arrive at a community.

For learners, this stage involves examining expectations, introducing relevant context, clarifying learning objectives, and preparing students to participate respectfully. Educators can ask students what they think they know about the place, where those impressions come from, and what they still need to understand.

The aim is not to eliminate assumptions before the visit. It is to make them visible so that learners can examine them later.

Preparation should also include practical guidance about consent, photography, language, cultural protocols, safety, and appropriate interaction. Students should understand that they are entering people's homes, workplaces, and social environments, not a setting created exclusively for visitors.

For community partners, preparation involves discussing the programme's purpose, learning objectives, proposed activities, expectations, time commitments, and any compensation or other forms of reciprocity. Community partners should have opportunities to suggest changes, decline activities, establish boundaries, and identify what they want students to understand.

Educators should ask significant questions like:

- What knowledge or experience do community partners want to share?
- What questions are appropriate for this context?
- What activities are useful, comfortable, and feasible for the people involved?
- How will consent, privacy, and photography be handled?
- What will community partners receive in return for their time and expertise?
- How will learners be prepared to avoid deficit-based assumptions?

The answers should shape the programme, rather than being treated as administrative details added after the itinerary is finalized.

### **5.2 During immersion: facilitate exchange**

During immersion, the educator's task is to create conditions for meaningful interaction while respecting the independence and priorities of community partners.

Activities should allow learners to observe and participate where appropriate, ask questions, listen to local explanations, and compare interpretations. The educator can provide context without positioning themselves as the only authority capable of explaining what students encounter.

It is also important to avoid treating every community interaction as a performance for visitors. A farmer should not have to disclose personal hardship to make a lesson meaningful. An artisan should not be expected to demonstrate work without agreement. A community should not be asked to repeatedly tell the same story simply because it is useful to successive student groups.

Useful facilitation practices include introducing community partners by highlighting their knowledge, skills, and work rather than focusing solely on their social circumstances. Local partners should be encouraged to shape the questions and activities to ensure that their perspectives and priorities are meaningfully represented. Students should be guided to ask open-ended questions and listen attentively without immediately proposing solutions. Facilitators should also create an environment that welcomes disagreement, uncertainty, and diverse interpretations while avoiding the assumption that one person's experiences represent an entire community. Sufficient time should be allocated for reflection rather than filling every moment with planned activities. Finally, regular communication with community partners is essential to understand their experiences, gather feedback, and ensure that interactions remain

respectful, inclusive, and mutually beneficial. These practices help move immersion from a sequence of observations towards a learning process shaped by relationships.

### **5.3 After Immersion: Interpret and Apply**

The learning process should continue after learners leave the community.

Students can revisit the questions they raised before the programme, compare them with what they encountered, and identify where their understanding has changed or remained uncertain. They can connect observations to academic concepts and examine the limitations of what they learned during a short immersion.

Application may take different forms depending on the programme's objectives. A university course might require a reflective paper or case analysis. A school programme might involve a presentation connecting local knowledge to a curriculum topic. A professional learning programme might ask participants to redesign a project or policy approach.

Where students produce outputs for community partners, the work should be relevant, feasible, and requested or agreed upon by those partners. A presentation, report, or proposal is not automatically a contribution simply because students created it.

The post-immersion stage should also provide an opportunity for feedback from community partners. They should be able to comment on the process, identify concerns, and suggest improvements for future programmes.

A useful closing question is not only, "What did the students learn?" but also, "What did the people involved think of the learning process, and what should happen differently next time?"

## **6. An Adaptable Learning Scenario**

The following scenario illustrates how an educator can redesign a conventional field visit using the community-as-co-educator approach. It is an

illustrative teaching example, not a report of a specific evaluated intervention.

### **6.1 Conventional design: visiting a farming community**

Imagine that a university organises a visit to a farming community as part of a course on sustainability and rural development.

The programme includes transport to the village, a walk-through farmland, a presentation by the visiting faculty member, photographs, a question-and-answer session, and a return journey.

Students are asked to write about rural livelihoods and identify challenges faced by farmers.

This design can provide useful exposure, but several questions remain. Who decided which aspects of farming would be discussed? Were farmers involved in defining the learning objectives? Do students understand the context of the practices they observed? Are farmers being asked to provide time and expertise without appropriate recognition? What happens to the students' observations after the visit?

The problem is not the visit itself. The problem is that the educational structure may position the community as a source of information without giving its members an active role in shaping the learning.

### **6.2 Redesigned approach: learning with farming knowledge holders**

In a community-as-co-educator design, the educator begins by consulting interested local partners and identifying a learning question that is relevant to both the curriculum and the context.

For example, the question might be: **How do farming decisions connect soil, water, labour, markets, and household livelihoods?**

The farmer or community partner helps decide what can be explored, which activities are appropriate, and what students should understand before arriving.

Students receive a pre-visit activity in which they record their existing assumptions about farming and rural livelihoods. During the visit, they engage with the agreed activities, listen to local explanations, and ask questions about decision-making, uncertainty, and change. The educator helps connect these encounters to course concepts without claiming to speak on behalf of the farmer. Afterwards, students reflect on which assumptions were challenged, what they learned from local expertise, what they still do not understand, and

how their observations relate to wider debates about sustainability and development.

If the community partner identifies a useful output, students may prepare a short learning resource or case study in consultation with them. The partner is given an opportunity to review how their knowledge is represented, and any agreed compensation or contribution is completed.

The difference between the two approaches is not simply the number of activities. It is the role the community plays in defining, facilitating, and reviewing the educational process.

### 6.3 Comparing the two designs

| Design question                      | Conventional visit                           | Community-as-co-educator approach                                                               |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Who defines the learning objectives? | Primarily the visiting institution           | Institution and community partners, through discussion                                          |
| What is the community's role?        | Host or source of information                | Active contributor to learning design and interpretation                                        |
| How do students prepare?             | Receive itinerary and background information | Examine assumptions, context, protocols, and learning questions                                 |
| What happens during the visit?       | Observe, listen, and ask questions           | Participate where appropriate, engage in dialogue, and reflect                                  |
| How is learning assessed?            | Often through student assignments            | Through student reflection and relevant feedback from partners                                  |
| How is reciprocity considered?       | May be implicit or overlooked                | Discussed explicitly with community partners                                                    |
| What happens afterwards?             | Students complete their assignment           | Students reflect, apply learning, and follow agreed procedures for sharing outputs and feedback |

The comparison is intended as a planning tool, not a claim that every conventional visit is extractive or that every co-educator programme is

automatically ethical. The quality of either approach depends on how it is implemented.

## **7. A Practice-Oriented Workshop for Educators**

This section translates the paper into an activity that can be used in educator training, international education conferences, or programme-design workshops.

### **7.1 Workshop purpose**

The workshop invites participants to redesign a familiar field experience so that local people have a more active role in shaping what and how learners learn.

It is suitable for educators working in schools, universities, international exchange, service learning, field education, or community-engaged programmes.

**Suggested duration:** 45–60 minutes.

**Materials:** Paper or a shared digital workspace, pens, a sample immersion scenario, and a framework worksheet.

### **7.2 Activity 1: Identify the assumptions**

**Time: 10 minutes**

Participants begin by selecting a field visit, international programme, or community experience they have organised or attended.

They answer five questions:

1. What did the learners expect to see or learn?
2. Who selected the place and designed the activities?
3. Whose knowledge was treated as authoritative?
4. What assumptions might learners bring into the experience?
5. What might the community want learners to understand that is missing from the current design?

The objective is to identify how educational authority is distributed. Participants are encouraged to notice whether local people shape the learning process or mainly appear within an itinerary designed by others.

### **7.3 Activity 2: Redesign the experience**

**Time: 15–20 minutes**

Participants work individually or in small groups to redesign their chosen experience using the following worksheet.

#### **Community-as-co-educator design worksheet**

- **Learning question:** What should learners investigate or understand?
- **Community partners:** Who has relevant knowledge, and who wants to participate?
- **Local priorities:** What would community partners like learners to understand, and what boundaries should be respected?
- **Preparation:** What context, assumptions, and protocols should learners examine before the visit?
- **Experience:** What activity will learners undertake, and how will community partners shape it?
- **Reflection:** What questions will help learners interpret the experience critically?
- **Application:** How will learners connect the experience to their curriculum, work, or future decisions?
- **Reciprocity:** What forms of recognition, compensation, feedback, or contribution have been agreed with partners?
- **Evaluation:** How will the educator assess learning and obtain feedback from community partners?

Groups should identify at least one change to the original programme that increases community agency or improves the quality of the exchange.

### **7.4 Activity 3: Examine the ethical dimensions**

**Time: 10 minutes**

Participants review their redesigned experience using three questions:

**Agency:** Can community partners shape the activities, decline participation, and influence how their knowledge is represented?

**Reciprocity:** Have educators discussed the benefits, costs, time commitments, and possible burdens of participation with the community?

**Interpretation:** Does the design encourage learners to question their own assumptions, or does it simply invite them to confirm what they already believe?

Participants then identify one risk that remains and one change that could reduce it.

This activity is important because a programme can adopt the language of community partnership while leaving decision-making power unchanged. The goal is to make the distribution of authority visible and to identify practical improvements.

### **7.5 Activity 4: Share and reflect**

**Time: 10–15 minutes**

Groups present their redesigned experience and explain what changed.

The facilitator can close with the following questions:

- What changed when you treated community members as co-educators?
- Which assumptions were most difficult to recognise?
- What would make the programme more reciprocal?
- How could you tell whether the learning was meaningful?
- What would you need to change in your institution to implement this approach?

Participants leave with a draft design that can be developed further for their own educational context.

### **7.6 Workshop outcomes**

By the end of the activity, participants should be able to, identify aspects of an immersion programme that position communities primarily as destinations or subjects of study. Secondly participants should be able to recognise community knowledge as a potential contribution to

curriculum and experiential learning. Participants should be able to design opportunities for preparation, interaction, reflection, and application.

Identify ethical considerations relating to agency, consent, representation, and reciprocity and develop at least one practical change to an existing field experience or community-engaged programme.

These are intended workshop learning outcomes. Their achievement would need to be assessed through participant feedback or evaluation if the workshop were delivered as a formal educational intervention.

## **8. Evaluating Community-Based Learning Responsibly**

If communities are recognised as co-educators, programme evaluation must extend beyond student satisfaction. A programme may be enjoyable and educational for visiting students while still imposing unwanted demands on community partners.

Evaluation should therefore consider at least three dimensions.

### **8.1 Learner learning**

Learner outcomes may include the ability to explain a local practice in context, recognise limitations in prior assumptions, engage respectfully across differences, connect experience to academic concepts, and formulate questions for further inquiry.

These outcomes can be examined through reflective writing, interviews, portfolios, presentations, or other assessments appropriate to the programme. Self-reported changes can be useful, but they should not automatically be treated as evidence of lasting behavioural transformation.

## **8.2 Community experience**

Community partners should have opportunities to evaluate whether participation was meaningful, manageable, respectful, and aligned with their priorities.

Relevant questions include:

- Were the programme objectives and expectations clear?
- Did partners have sufficient influence over the activities?
- Were time, labour, knowledge, and other contributions recognised appropriately?
- Were consent, privacy, and representation handled respectfully?
- Did the programme create benefits or burdens that partners considered important?
- Would partners want to participate again, and under what conditions?

Not every community partner will share the same view. Evaluation should allow for disagreement and should not assume that one representative can speak for an entire community.

## **8.3 Institutional and programme learning**

The institution or organising organisation should also evaluate whether the design supported meaningful engagement.

This may include examining the quality of preparation, the role of facilitators, the accessibility of reflection activities, the management of safety and wellbeing, the use of student outputs, and the extent to which community feedback influenced future programmes.

The purpose is continuous improvement rather than simply demonstrating success.

A responsible evaluation process should distinguish between activities delivered, learning reported, outputs produced, and outcomes demonstrated. For example, completing a village visit is an activity; submitting a reflective assignment is an output; demonstrating a more

nuanced understanding is a possible learning outcome; and sustained changes in professional practice would require separate evidence.

This distinction is essential if community-based learning is to be discussed credibly within educational research and institutional reporting.

## **9. Discussion**

The Local Narratives approach contributes to practice-oriented discussions of experiential learning by shifting attention from where learning happens to how educational relationships are organised.

Its central proposition is that communities should not be included in educational programmes only because they offer access to unfamiliar settings. Their knowledge, experience, and interpretations can actively shape the learning process.

The approach brings together several principles from experiential learning, place-based education, intercultural learning, and critical pedagogy. It emphasises that direct experience must be accompanied by opportunities for reflection; that local contexts influence the meaning of what learner's encounter; and that dialogue can expose assumptions about knowledge, culture, and development.

The practical framework also introduces a question of reciprocity. If students gain educational, professional, or personal value from immersion, educators should consider how the programme recognises the people who contribute to that learning. Reciprocity does not require that every interaction produce an identical benefit for every participant. It does require honest discussion about priorities, consent, effort, recognition, and the limits of what a programme can offer.

There are, however, important tensions.

First, institutional learning objectives may not always align with community priorities. Universities and schools operate within curricula, assessment systems, schedules, and budgets. Community partners may have different timelines,

interests, and constraints. Treating communities as co-educators requires educators to negotiate these differences rather than assume that institutional requirements should always take precedence.

Second, the concept of co-education can itself become symbolic. An institution may invite a community member to speak while retaining all decisions about programme content, timing, representation, and evaluation. Meaningful participation requires more than presence; it requires appropriate opportunities to influence the educational process.

Third, the approach must avoid romanticizing rural communities. Recognising local knowledge does not mean assuming that all traditional practices are sustainable, that every community shares the same values, or that local expertise cannot be questioned. Community-based learning should support critical inquiry while treating people with dignity and recognising their right to interpret their own experiences.

Fourth, educators should be cautious about using the language of impact. A programme may create opportunities for learning without demonstrating long-term change. A student may report a new perspective without acting differently, and a community may welcome a visit without receiving lasting benefit. Evaluation must reflect these distinctions.

Finally, the framework presented here is a practice-oriented approach rather than a validated model. It provides educators with questions and design principles that can be adapted and evaluated. Further research could examine how community participation influences student learning, how local partners experience different models of immersion, and which programme features support reciprocal relationships over time.

The value of the approach lies not in promising that every immersion will be transformative, but in helping educators design more thoughtful

relationships between learners, communities, and knowledge.

## **10. Conclusion**

Experiential learning creates opportunities to connect education with the world beyond institutional classrooms. Yet the educational value of an immersion programme depends on more than the destination, duration, or number of activities. It also depends on whose knowledge is recognised, how learning relationships are structured, and whether the experience creates opportunities for critical reflection and meaningful exchange.

This paper has introduced the Local Narratives approach to community-based experiential learning, centred on the proposition that rural communities can be active co-educators rather than simply hosts, destinations, or subjects of study. Its guiding principles – ‘People over Places’, ‘Stories over Itineraries’, ‘Exchange over Consumption’, and ‘Contribution over Extraction’, offer a practical basis for examining how educational programmes are designed.

The learning sequence of Experience, Reflection, Interaction, Application, and Impact provides an adaptable framework for connecting field experiences with interpretation and subsequent learning. The accompanying programme-design guidance and workshop activity show how educators can use this framework to reconsider their learning objectives, prepare students and community partners, facilitate interaction, structure reflection, and evaluate outcomes.

The approach does not suggest that every community encounter will produce transformation or that community participation automatically makes a programme ethical. Instead, it invites educators to examine the assumptions and relationships embedded in educational travel and field-based learning.

The central question is therefore not only how to take students beyond the classroom, but how to

create learning environments in which knowledge can emerge through respectful relationships between institutions, learners, and communities. When communities have a meaningful role in shaping the learning process, education can move beyond visiting a place to engaging with the people, practices, and knowledge that give it meaning.

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