



# **“What am I doing for my community?”**

- Cross-cultural reflections and learnings from the Experience Program in La Guajira, Colombia

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Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, SLU  
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# “What am I doing for my community?” - Cross-cultural reflections and learnings from the Experience Program in La Guajira, Colombia

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## Abstract

Indigenous peoples are increasingly recognized as initiators of innovative solutions and carriers of crucial knowledge to address sustainability challenges. However, many people from urban environments often lack opportunities to engage with and learn from indigenous communities. In this study, I explore the sustainability-driven initiative that facilitates cross-cultural learning: the Experience Program (EP) in La Guajira, Colombia. In this community-based ecotourism (CBET) program, the participants from the big cities get to immerse themselves in several communities of the Wayúu people. By using a qualitative research approach, this study combines participant observations and interviews, in order to investigate the Experiential Learning (EL) and the participants' changes in perspectives derived from the EP, with the help of Jack Mezirow's theory on transformative learning (TL) as well as Pierre Walter's categorization of EL in CBET. The findings from this study reveal how nature, adventure and culture experiences gave the participants several opportunities for reflections, which were not only generated from conversations, but also from communication with non-humans. The EP also made the participants critically reflect on their previous assumptions and formed new points of views regarding the Wayúu people's a) reputation, behavior and way of life, b) women leaders, c) environmental work and d) community and pride. This highlights the potential of CBET initiatives to foster self-awareness and critical thinking, which are some of the key competencies in education for sustainable development. To further deepen our understanding of learning in CBET, future research could assess participants' long-term transformations or interview community hosts in the context of La Guajira.

*Keywords:* Transformative learning, Experiential learning, Community-based ecotourism, Indigenous peoples.

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# Abbreviations

EP	Experience program
TL	Transformative learning
CBET	Community-based ecotourism
EL	Experiential learning

# 1. Introduction

In recent years, international organizations are starting to recognize the value of indigenous peoples' knowledge of sustainable ways of living, which is crucial for people to learn in order to address the climate crisis. UNESCO and ISSC (2013) state in the World Social Science Report that policymakers and social scientists all over the world are beginning to acknowledge indigenous communities as initiators of innovative solutions to climate change-related challenges.

To face these major existential challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss and social unrest - it is acknowledged that we also need changes in governance, economic- and social systems and new capacities that empower human agency and welcome human diversity (Cheok et al. 2025). In these matters, indigenous perspectives have much to contribute (ibid). However, people living far from these communities, such as those in major cities, often lack opportunities to engage with and learn from indigenous groups.

One organization that does facilitate such encounters is called CoimpactoB, a BIC (Benefit of Collective Interest) company in Colombia that works with indigenous communities and organizations to provide services and education for economic, social and environmental development (CoimpactoB n.d. -a). They have initiated an “Experience program” (EP) where university students or companies get to go on a trip to immerse themselves into the indigenous communities of La Guajira, named Wayúu. This program aims to raise social awareness and to create a space for mutual knowledge sharing and professional and personal growth, both for the participants and communities involved (CoimpactoB n.d. -b).

Even though CoimpactoB is not mainly a tourist company, I argue that the EP can be understood as a form of community-based ecotourism (CBET). While ecotourism usually focuses on including elements of wildlife, biodiversity and adventure experiences in nature, CBET concerns the visitors' immersion of local and indigenous communities residing in natural environments - with the aim of preserving these environments and sustaining traditional cultures (Sen & Walter 2019). In CBET, visitors' learning is central. Given the importance of embracing indigenous perspectives to face sustainability challenges - we need to better understand the *learning* that occurs in these encounters that takes place in, for instance, the EP.

In this thesis project, I followed along the EP in La Guajira with a role as a volunteer for CoimpactoB. During the EP I did participant observations and interviewed the participants afterward. When involved in the EP, I found that it mostly consisted of learning-by-doing-activities, which is why I chose to partly put my focus on *experiential learning* (EL) in CBET. EL is when learning occurs through active participation, which enhances knowledge development and

clarifies abstract concepts for the learner through personal experiences applied in real-life contexts (UNESCO 2017).

Transformative learning (TL) lays the foundation for this thesis - a learning theory that emphasizes how adults critically reflect on their own assumptions and perspectives to develop a deeper understanding of themselves and the world (Mezirow 2000, Mezirow 1997). This framework, which is one of the leading learning theories for sustainable development (Singer-Brodowski 2023), is relevant for understanding how participants in the EP engage with new experiences and potentially shift their worldviews. Hence, the other part of my focus is on the *changes in perspectives* of the participants.

By examining both the EL (theorized in relation to CBET) and shifts in perspectives - this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how learning in a cross-cultural setting for sustainable development can occur in practice. Since UNESCO (2017) highlights EL and TL as two out of the three key pedagogical approaches in education for sustainable development, it becomes particularly relevant to analyze how they manifest in the EP.



## 2. Research aim & questions

When participating in the EP, we visited a range of communities where the indigenous people Wayúu live and work. In this master's thesis project, my aim is to explore the participants' cross-cultural learning in the Experience Program (EP). I view the EP as a communication situation, where learning can occur through communication between humans as well as between humans and non-humans. I analyzed the observations and interviews by using Jack Mezirow's theory on TL as well as Pierre Walter categories of EL. Through these theories, I discuss how some experiences could potentially lead to transformation, and the participants' shifts in assumptions and expectations, which is what frames their feeling, thinking and acting (Boström et al. 2018).

### *Research questions:*

1. How did the EP provide EL?
2. How did the participants critically reflect on their previous assumptions and discuss new perspectives, in connection to the EP?

I answered the first research question mostly with the help of my field notes but also with some input from the interviewees. The analysis of the second question is almost exclusively based on interviewee responses, since it concerns their perceptions and experiences. My material was analyzed with the help of concepts from TL-theory and previous research regarding TL in CBET. After answering my research questions, a discussion follows with some reflections regarding the EP and the participants' learning for sustainable development.

With this project, I'm hoping to be able to contribute with insights for organizations like CoimpactoB and similar, in a way that helps them to reflect on their cross-cultural knowledge exchange and learning activities to advance their work for sustainable development.

### 3. Background

#### 3.1 La Guajira, the Wayúu and indigenous populations

La Guajira is located on the northernmost tip of Colombia and South America (Figure 1). Here lives the Wayúu people - the country's largest Indigenous group - with a population of roughly 380 000 (Torres Garzón 2024). The Wayúu are one of few indigenous populations that have been able to maintain their culture, language (Wayuunaiki) and relative autonomy, by historically resisting colonial forces (Ferrero Botero 2015). The region is rich in environmental resources such as coal, gas and beautiful beaches, but its people still suffer from a challenging economic situation. There are not many formal job opportunities, water shortage is limiting agricultural practices and many people in La Guajira suffer from malnutrition (Torres Garzón 2024).



*Figure 1. Map of Colombia and La Guajira. Source: Google Maps. Edited by author.*

Historically, the Wayúu people have been able to handle the water shortages and adapt to the harsh environmental conditions, but the Spanish colonization and then the 20th century's expansion of coal mining and large-scale agricultural projects have left the local populations with even less water, and the situation is now even more intensified because of climate change (The Guardian 2024). In addition, Indigenous rights are still violated in La Guajira. As one study shows, the violations of local peoples' human rights are sometimes closely related to the interests of foreign large companies as well as Colombian policies that prioritize neoliberal agendas (Suárez Ricaurte 2022).

In Colombia, there are 115 indigenous peoples according to the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE) (Minority Rights Group, 2023). The location of these indigenous communities in deserts, mountains, forests, jungles and plains together with their knowledge of their surrounding environment makes them crucial participants in climate change research, although

Latin America's social science contributions to this research are often neglected - despite that it often includes indigenous knowledge and traditional practices (ibid). As I mentioned in the introduction, indigenous perspectives can generate creative proposals for problems associated with climate change, which could result in lifestyles that are in harmony with the environment (ibid).

To add complexity to this, Canessa (2018 in Goyes & South 2021) warns us to avoid oversimplification when describing indigeneity and mentions that one should not fall into the trap of romanticizing either. Furthermore, every indigenous group is different from each other, and grouping their various cultural characteristics could be a misleading idea rooted in colonial history, where the label "Indian" was used to represent all indigenous peoples as if they were all the same (Goyes & South 2021). To avoid collapsing multiple distinct Indigenous groups into one, it is more appropriate to refer to a specific group by their Native nation name (ibid), in my case - the Wayúu.

### 3.2 CoimpactoB and the Experience Program

As mentioned in the introduction, CoimpactoB works with several indigenous groups in Colombia and other countries, but mostly with the Wayúu peoples in La Guajira. Apart from organizing the EP, they have many other projects related to sustainability and development for the region. I participated in the EP that took place from the 28th of October 2024 to the 1st of November 2024, which was CoimpactoB's and the communities' first time receiving a large group of people. The EP is not a regular activity that one can book on a website, instead one must contact CoimpactoB to go on one of these.

Approximately 25 participants came from a large international company as they had a sort of 'sustainability week'. This visiting company had the aim of creating social awareness for their employees - not just to go on holiday, but also to learn about the communities in La Guajira and contribute with ideas to the community's challenges. We visited six different places during this week, apart from Riohacha and Manaure where we stayed, five of them were Wayúu communities and one of them a school with Wayúu students. Before the EP, the participants from the visiting company were divided into five groups, including 4-5 members. Each group had one member from CoimpactoB (which is where I was included, since they counted me as a volunteer for them - more about this in the section 6.4 Methodological discussion). Most of the activities throughout the EP were performed in these groups.

## 4. Previous research

### 4.1 Community-based ecotourism (CBET)

Tourism is one of the largest industries in the world (Guerrero-Moreno & Oliveira-Junior 2024). Community-based ecotourism (CBET) is a form of tourism that integrates environmental conservation with local community participation, with a central focus on visitor learning and education (Walter 2016). Its aim is to consolidate cultural, social, environmental and economic sustainability through community involvement (Guerrero-Moreno & Oliveira-Junior 2024). CBET has many related forms of tourism, such as ecotourism, community-based tourism (CBT), ethno tourism and volunteer tourism.

Guerrero-Moreno & Oliviera-Junior (2024) reviewed research on CBET between 2002 and 2022 to understand the patterns, trends and gaps. They found that the scientific literature on CBET has grown significantly in the last two decades, with Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, China, South Africa, Mexico, India, Ecuador, Brazil and Botswana as the top 10 most researched countries within this field. The authors could also see that the most popular topic in the field was the evaluation of CBET's impact. The positive impacts brought up in this review explained that CBET can boost the local economy through tourism income, it can create jobs, support small business and strengthen indigenous communities. Furthermore, it can help to protect culture and nature, improve living conditions and empower both communities and women. The negative impacts pointed out in the review suggest that there is a risk of unequal distribution of resources, conflicts within and between communities, environmental and cultural harm, rising living costs for locals, ethnic discrimination, job insecurity and not enough training opportunities in CBET (ibid). The second most popular topic was to study perceptions, attitudes and experiences by visitors and hosts - which the former is within my focus in this thesis. Studying this topic is very relevant to the local communities since their livelihoods are directly affected, and it provides crucial information about its success and sustainability (ibid). Guerrero-Moreno & Oliviera-Junior (2024) also found that indigenous populations included in CBET research are scarce compared to the research on non-indigenous populations. They also presented the 25 most used keywords in the literature - 'Learning' was not one of them.

Two researchers who are focusing on learning in CBET are Sen & Walter (2020). They classify CBET as a form of 'informal learning' as it takes place outside the formal schooling, and describe it as mostly experiential, meaning that one is learning by doing (ibid). In their study on TL of CBET hosts in Cambodia, the authors argue that learning goes two ways in CBET, as visitors learn from their hosts, but the hosts also learn from the visitors. From their findings, they

could see that the hosts in Cambodia experienced TL in topics such as environmental conservation, changes in gender roles and relations, and in their own local culture as the hosts experienced a cultural revival and learned to value their traditions. Additionally, Sen & Walter (2020) mention that there is still not a lot of research that connects TL with tourism.

In another study, Knollenberg et al. (2014) discusses TL in the related area of volunteer tourism. They claim that this form of tourism naturally involves stepping into a new and different environment, which makes good conditions to foster TL. When combining this physical shift with a TL-process, this could serve as a tool for volunteers to challenge their existing views and learn to better understand complex issues like poverty and to combat reinforced stereotypes (Guttentag 2009 in Knollenberg et al. 2014). Knollenberg et al. (2014) declare that volunteer tourism has shown the potential to facilitate changes in perspectives associated with TL. For example, visitors can experience a shift in their view of life and personal development (Lo & Lee 2011 in Knollenberg et al. 2014). Other possible outcomes include consciousness- raising experiences for participants, leading to a changed view of society (McGehee & Santos 2005 in Knollenberg et al. 2014).

In Colombia, several studies have been conducted on the alternative forms of tourism, but those within my reach - none of them used the term CBET or focused on learning. In La Guajira, very few papers on community tourism could be found. For example, one article examines sustainable ethno-tourism and ecotourism as a tool for environmental management in the area of Ranchería River delta where Wayúu communities live. The authors emphasize the need for a participatory environmental management that includes both governmental institutions and local communities to ensure conservation and preservation, as the tourism industry is growing in La Guajira (Muñoz Estrada & Muñoz Estrada 2024).

In conclusion, there is a lack of studies focusing on TL for visitors in CBET, a deficit of CBET-research in Colombia and with indigenous populations. Hence, this thesis fills the research gap on qualitative studies regarding visitors learning in CBET in La Guajira, Colombia.

## 4.2 Education for Sustainable development

As I argued in the introduction, learning in CBET is central. Specifically, the learning of indigenous perspectives offered in the EP could be of great importance when facing sustainability challenges. But what exactly do we need to learn in order to reach for sustainable development? UNESCO (2017) has compiled 8 key competencies or learning objectives that are considered of great importance to advance for sustainability. These are Systems thinking competency, Anticipatory competency, Normative competency, Strategic competency, Collaboration

competency, Critical thinking competency, Self-awareness competency and Integrated problem-solving competency (De Haan 2010; Rieckmann 2012; Wiek et al. 2011 in UNESCO, p. 10). Critical thinking means the competency to critically examine established norms, practices and viewpoints, to reflect on one's own beliefs, perspectives and actions and to take a stance in sustainability discussions. The final competency I wish to explain is Self-awareness, which is the capacity to reflect on one's own role within both the local community and global society, to continually assess and motivate one's actions and to navigate one's emotions and aspirations (ibid). In the discussion part of this thesis, I will reflect on these competencies in relation to my results.

## 5. Theoretical Framework

In this section, I will outline the theoretical framework for this thesis project. First, I will introduce TL theory and describe three key concepts that stem from this and how I will apply two of them: ‘frame of reference’ and ‘point of view’. I then explain how transformation can occur, by ‘objective’- and ‘subjective reframing’. This follows by describing what a ‘disorienting dilemma’ is, and why I will mostly use ‘reflecting dilemma’ instead. To contextualize TL in CBET, I will introduce Walter’s (2016) three categories in EL: ‘Nature’, ‘Adventure’, and ‘Culture’, and describe in what ways these could act as a catalyst for reflection and learning. I conclude this section with a discussion of my view of learning, communication and knowledge and a clarification of how TL theory can be applied overall in this context.

### 5.1 Transformative learning

TL is a theoretical approach founded by Jack Mezirow, that focuses on the individual learning for adults (Westberg 2005). The aim of TL is for adults to become aware of their own ways of seeing and thinking about the world, to understand it better (Mezirow 2000). Instead of uncritically acting on the instructions of others, adults can become aware by critically reflecting on one’s own assumptions and expectations (that are usually taken for granted) and thus act according to one’s own values, purposes, and meanings (ibid). With these skills, this embraces “the experience of seeing our worldview rather than seeing *with* our worldview so that we can be more open to and draw upon other views and possibilities” (Sterling 2011, p. 23, emphasis in original).

#### *Frame of reference and point of views*

Becoming aware and able to critically reflect on one’s own assumptions means that one can transform their so-called *frame of reference*, which is crucial for the type of learning needed to adapt to change (Mezirow 1997). Every person has structures of meaning that constitute our frame of reference, which provides the context for our sensory experiences and guides us in how to appropriate this experience (Boström et al. 2018, Mezirow 2000). Our frame of reference is constructed by the learning that we unintentionally have assimilated from the culture we grew up in (Mezirow 2000), and it is composed of two dimensions, our 1) habits of mind and 2) points of view. To put these concepts in an example: ‘ethnocentrism’ could be a habit of mind - when a person has the predisposition to see people from other groups as less worthy, which in turn is manifested as a *point of view* that involves our attitudes, feelings, judgments and beliefs that we have towards people from these other groups (e.g. homosexuals or people from a

specific area) (Mezirow 1997). Habits of minds are articulated with our points of views, which can be explained as “the constellation of belief, value judgment, attitude, and feeling that shapes a particular interpretation” (ibid, p. 6). Our customs and patterns in our actions can also express our points of view (Westberg 2005). A person's point of view is easier to identify, can change as we reassess and reflect on our assumptions, and is also more approachable for feedback (Mezirow 1997). On the other hand, our habits of mind are more durable, and cannot be appropriated by others (ibid). For these reasons, I will use the term ‘point of view’ when discussing the participants' perspective changes (answering research question 2), but not ‘habit of mind’, as I believe this would require further studies that would allow me to get to know the participants and their thought-patterns better. I will use the term ‘Frames of reference’ when discussing what these combined changes in our ‘points of view’ perhaps could mean or lead to.

### *Reframing*

So how does transformation happen? Mezirow (2000) claims that it may arise through either *objective reframing*, when the learner gets to critically reflect on others’ assumptions when situated in a narrative or in a problem-solving group task. Objective reframing could also happen, for example, when one reads a book or hears another person’s point of view without appropriating it (Mezirow 1997). Or *subjective reframing*, when the learner gets to critically self-reflect on one’s own assumptions, which usually involves emotional struggles since old perspectives are being challenged (Mezirow 2000). In the results, these two concepts help me analyze how the interviewees gain new points of view.

Mandy Singer-Brodowski (2023) declares that one of the main critiques of Mezirow’s theory is that he centers on rational thinking and ignores the emotional factors within a TL process. When our meaning perspectives are being challenged, it is normal that emotions arise, and especially negative ones such as fear, shame, anger or anxiety (ibid). For this reason, this thesis will also pay attention to the emotions that the interviewees express, as well as my own emotions that arose when participating in the EP.

Mezirow (2000) states that transformation normally follows ten phases when meanings are resolved. In this thesis, I will only describe and discuss the first phase, which is when the learner encounters a *disorienting dilemma*. A disorienting dilemma happens when someone starts to question a frame of reference in order to generate a more reflective, open-minded and well-justified worldview (ibid). It could be triggered by huge life events, but also by less dramatic challenges and happenings. In many cases, instead of ‘disorienting’, I



will use the term '*reflecting dilemmas*' when discussing my findings, which I believe is a word more suitable since many of the experiences had me or the interviewee's reflecting on various things, but they did not necessarily create a feeling of disorientation or have us losing our sense of direction (metaphorically speaking).

## 5.2 Experiential learning in CBET

When it comes to the tourists in community-based ecotourism (CBET), Walter (2016) argues that EL could serve as a catalyst for TL, when the participants encounter a disorienting dilemma from a stunning nature experience, an outdoor adventure, or an intercultural meeting - as they evoke strong emotional responses. He categorizes these disorienting dilemmas in EL, which are usually present in CBET, as: 'Nature Shock', 'Adventure Shock' and 'Culture Shock'. In the Findings-section, I will describe these categories, but not use the term "shock", as it didn't seem like the experience created a shock for the participants.

### *Nature Experiences*

In *Nature* experiences, when tourists are immersed in nature, and get to see e.g. wilderness landscapes or wild animals - strong emotions like wonderment, amazement and transcendence can be evoked, as we engage our senses, sometimes all five of them (Walter 2016). The moments when the visitor takes time to stand and stare, to contemplate, to get absorbed by the beautiful surroundings and/or animals and forgets modern daily life - this could unlock an ecocentric connection and create a spiritual, emotional and psychological response (Curtin 2009 in Walter 2016). Walter (2016) also points out that a disorienting dilemma can be generated when the spiritual experience of nature immersion is juxtaposed with a disturbing confrontation of its destruction. An example of this could be the experience of snorkeling in colorful reefs, and later on face the dead stumps of mangroves caused by shrimp farms, which could result in tourists wanting to learn more and maybe joining local forces to protect the shorelines from exploitation. In an earlier study, he concludes:

“[...] if we wish to foster transformative learning that might lead to ecological and environmental consciousness and activism, experiences not only of nature but also of the environmentally destructive practices of human beings should be a central concern.”  
(Walter 2013, p. 39)

### *Adventure Experiences*

*Adventure* experiences on the other hand involve physical and mental challenges, sometimes in dangerous, wilderness environments, and are closely related to

adventure tourism (Walter 2016). On the contrary of nature experiences which imply softer, sensual and more spiritual attributes, adventure experiences provoke sensations such as thrill, fear, flow, rush and risk, although direct physical danger is not a necessity in order for an activity to be classified as adventure (ibid). Examples of this could be demanding mountain treks, kayaking or wilderness camping (ibid). Adventure experiences might develop self-confidence and environmental awareness (ibid).

### *Culture Experiences*

Finally, *Culture* experiences in CBET imply informal adult learning regarding local cultures through personal connections. Walter (2016) relates this category to volunteer tourism and means that cultural experiences in CBET represent cross-cultural encounters, where tourists are exposed to and get to learn the local language, customs and worldviews. The usual curriculum comprises homestays with local families, interactions with the people living in the local area, community events and participation in their everyday activities (ibid). The disorienting dilemma in this category happens when the meaning perspectives of the participants are challenged (Taylor 1994 in Walter 2016). Walter (2016) gives an example of a disorienting dilemma in culture experiences when tourists found the information from a guidebook, outlining tourists attractions, hotels and restaurants, as contrasting to the knowledge they gained from the CBET hosts, that rather depicted local indigenous representations including land use, village names, spiritual designations for specific areas, etc.

The theory on these three categories in EL (Nature, Adventure, Culture) will provide the basis of the analysis for the first part of my findings and help me respond to my research question 1. I will discuss what activities and experiences from the EP that could be understood through the three categories and argue how they might provide reflecting dilemmas and hence act as a catalyst for TL.

## 5.3 Learning, communication and knowledge

Mezirow (1991 in Westberg 2005) emphasizes the importance of *communication* and *dialogues* in our learning processes, and he defines *learning* as a process where previous interpretations are being used to create new or revised interpretations regarding meanings and experiences that guide us in our actions. Actions in this case can also include making new decisions, making new associations, revising an opinion, solving problems, modify an attitude or change a behavior.

The EP could be understood as a communication situation, in which instrumental practices and constitutive processes can both be present and work in parallel. While an instrumental view understands communication as verbal and

nonverbal interactions with a purpose, the constitutive aspect embraces the values, meanings and relationships we could make of that communication (Pezzullo & Cox 2018). I wish to take on a constitutive perspective on communication. In practice, this means that I see myself and the other participants as actors who make sense of communication in our own unique ways. This perspective also extends to communication beyond human interactions. Similar to the theory of Kohn (2013), I believe that meaning making can occur everywhere within nature and is not restricted to interpersonal meetings. This sense-making from the EP as a communication situation is what I wish to grasp from a few aspects, particularly in relation to EL and shifts in perspective. My approach allows me to discuss the experiences, but also how the participants construct meaning through their engagement and communication with both humans and non-humans.

Furthermore, I wish to note how Mezirow (1991 in Westberg 2005) sees *knowledge* as something we produce rather than something we discover, where culture and language have a great significance. Our own ways of seeing the world - which we have gained from our culture, the norms and ideologies that we grew up with - will set the limits for our continued learning. (ibid) Thus TL strives to foster reflection that will make us aware of how we have gained our knowledge, and the values and perspective that lie behind it (Mezirow 2000). In this essay, I share Mezirow's view on learning and knowledge and will discuss my findings with these premises in mind. This also allows me to present the participant's perspectives and newly gained knowledge as something they have produced, and not as something that should be considered as an objective truth.

The idea of using TL theory for this thesis is not to decide whether the participants actually transformed or not (which would probably require longitudinal methods), but rather to analyze and discuss their perceptions, experiences and my own observations with those terms that the theory provides. Hopefully, this will provide a better understanding of the learning processes within CBET and be a help for the organizers of similar programs.

## 6. Methodology

This is a qualitative study, as my methods were participatory observations and semi-structured interviews. With the aim of exploring cross-cultural learnings for the participants in the EP, I used an abductive approach, since there was neither a formulated hypothesis nor was I completely open to any topic that my gathered material could lead me to. From the start of the thesis project, I wanted to have learning for sustainability in focus and therefore used TL theory as a base for my participant observations as well as in the interviews. In this chapter, I will first explain the methods used, followed by a description of how I analyzed my data by going through several stages of color coding. After this, I describe how I handled ethical concerns when gathering the data. Lastly, I will give a methodological discussion on changes and difficulties I faced during my fieldwork.

### 6.1 Participant observations and interviews

Alan Bryman (2012) describes participant observations as synonymous with ethnography, when the researcher immerses themselves in a group for a longer time and is listening to the people involved, observing behaviors, interactions, and asking questions. He also explains that full-scale ethnography requires a longer time of fieldwork, and that in projects such as a master thesis should rather be called micro-ethnography, where it is possible to put the focal point on a specific aspect of a topic. My focus as a participant observer was on what we got to experience during the EP, the learning-by-doing activities, my own and the participants' general reactions. I was open to all communication that occurred during the EP, including verbal and non-verbal, as well as communication with non-humans. I had an overt role, meaning that I was open about what I did there, what my purpose of participating was and what my focus was on (ibid). Since the EP was filled with activities, I took a few short notes during the day, and later in the evening I summarized the day in my notes. As I felt unsatisfied with the handwritten field notes, I recorded some further thoughts based on these notes about a week after the EP, to give more extensive descriptions. The participant observations (or micro-ethnography) allowed me to witness the participants' experiences myself, which led me to understand which moments that left me impacted by the experiences of the EP. This method was also meant to help me get a context for the interviews, and to understand the interviewees better.

Bryman (2012) mentions that participant observations are normally followed by interviews to collect more data, which is what I did in this project. I aimed at conducting semi-structured interviews, which Bryman (2012) describes as having a list of open questions, with room for the interviewee to answer freely and for the interviewer to pick up on a topic and make follow-up questions. I ended up doing

very few follow-up questions, since my questions were already formulated in a way that would allow me to dig deeper into the learnings and perceived potential transformations. These interviews helped me to access the perceptions of the participants, how they experienced their own learnings and perceived potential changes in perspectives. The interviews also provided valuable insights into how the interviewees make meaning of what we experienced in the EP.

I conducted five interviews with participants from the visiting company, which were all recorded. The people from the visiting company were a seemingly homogenous group, most of them between 20–35 years old, all living in either Medellín or Bogotá. I chose my interviewees randomly, and took the opportunity to ask them when we were in a conversation during the week of EP. All the interviews took place the week after the EP, as that week had a very tight schedule and did not leave any time for me to go aside and conduct interviews without hurrying. Two of them took place physically in Medellín, and the other three online, and the length went from 30 to 50 minutes. I interviewed three women and two men. Four of them were conducted in Spanish, and one in English. See Appendix for the full interview guide.

## 6.2 Data analysis

The first step in my data analysis was to transcribe the recorded interviews and translate those in Spanish to English. Then, I started to read through my interview material and do my first round of color coding.

As I had an abductive approach, I was open to anything interesting that could come my way within the topic of learning for sustainable development. In my first round of coding, I tried to base my categories on TL theory (Figure 2), but found many overlaps and difficulties, especially for ‘learnings’ as I realized that all other categories could also count as this. In my second round, I changed the codes to ‘changed assumptions and expectations regarding the Wayúu and ‘Self-reflection and emotions’, which I also realized was hard to separate as many self-reflections related to their changed assumptions regarding the Wayúu people. I found that the findings could be better explained as themes, through which I will present my findings in the following Result section.

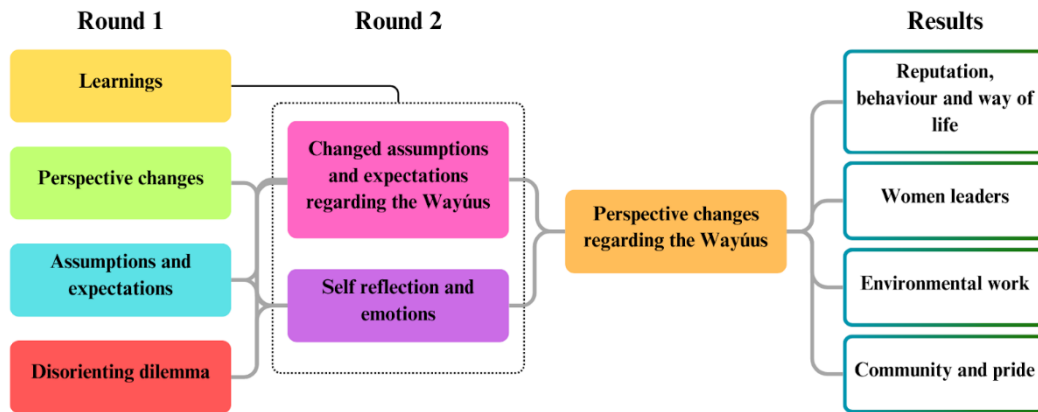


Figure 2. The color-coding process for the interview material. Design: Author.

After having finished a few rounds of color coding, I found the theory on TL in CBET by Walter (2016), which helped me analyze the EL aspect to this thesis. By including observations through the lens of his three categories in CBET (Nature, Adventure and Culture), it complements the interviews since the reader would first be introduced to the experiences we had during the EP and then get an understanding of how the participants' perspectives changed. I went through my notes and recordings to categorize the experiences under these given themes. In the writing process, I added a few quotes from the interviews in order to clarify my reasoning.

## 6.3 Ethics

### *Data management*

Before the start of the program, I told all participants verbally that I was participating with the aim of writing my thesis about learning in the Experience Program and what I wanted to focus on. Since I would not focus on anyone's personal behavior and data, I did not collect their consent for my participation. For this reason, I will not quote any of the participants from my field notes, but only describe situations that arose, and retell things we learned in the EP. Prior to the interviews, I gave them an information sheet regarding the data I would collect, how I would store it, that they participate anonymously, etc. For the online interviews I took the participants' verbal consent, and for the two interviews that were in person they signed a consent form. Throughout the entire research process, I ensured that all interviewees remained anonymous. In the result section, I refer to them as Interviewee 1, Interviewee 2, and so on.

I translated the interviews myself. Since Spanish is my third language, I occasionally used Google Translate to help me translate sentences to English, but

never for longer sections in order to avoid uploading parts of the interview to cloud services.

### *Representing others*

With my intention to bring insight into some aspects of learnings from the EP, I also bring forward interpretations of the Wayúu peoples. When describing, labeling and categorizing groups, we risk ascribing attributes, visions and ideas to others and hence placing them in a position they can't control or may not wish for (Joosse et al. 2020). Furthermore, representing marginalized voices places the researcher as a 'knowledge broker' - a position that is never truly neutral or value-free (ibid). I believe it is extra important to, again, highlight that both my own or the interviewee's perspectives that are put forward through these methods are highly subjective and should not be considered a universal truth.

## 6.4 Methodological discussion

### *Methodological changes*

In this study, I initially wanted to focus on the *co-creation* between the company participants and the Wayúu communities, which CoimpactoB had promoted as part of the EP. I expected the participants and Wayúu representatives to sit around a table to collaborate and exchange ideas through dialogue regarding sustainability challenges, but in practice, the knowledge exchange took a different form. Each visit began with a community presentation followed by activities. At the end of the visit, we sat in our groups and quickly discussed possible solutions to the community's challenges (which had been presented by CoimpactoB on beforehand, but were not mentioned by the communities as I could tell). Each group presented their suggestions in front of everyone, and the community rated their favorite suggested solution. When I realized that co-creation was not happening as I expected, I adjusted my interview questions to focus solely on participants' learning and reflections on their experiences.

### *My own role*

As one of the interviewees for this thesis put it, "every person is a world", I believe that my experiences and takeaways from this Experience Program are very different from the other participants. Participating in this program opened a new world for me, as I learned so much about the Wayúu culture and ways of living, about organizations like CoimpactoB, about Colombians from the cities and about myself in this context - but through my own interpretations. Therefore, I wish to bring awareness to the fact that I, myself, see patterns through a lens that is affected by my own biases and experiences, which in turn can affect my

analysis and results. By being constantly self-reflective and critical, I have tried to not let this affect my thesis to a larger extent.

Regarding my role in this thesis project, there is another factor that might have affected the research outcome in this thesis. I was dressed in the uniform of CoimpactoB, which included an orange T-shirt, a brown vest and a hat, all with CoimpactoB's logotype on them. I also lived with them in a separate house from the visiting company. I never experienced any negative effects because of this, but I did realize that people thought I was more involved with the program/CoimpactoB than I was. For example, sometimes people asked me where we were supposed to go for our next activity, which was not always clear for me either. This probably made it hard for me to be considered as a "neutral outsider", and maybe this affected what people felt they could tell me in the interviews. On the other hand, Bryman (2012) suggests that having a role could be positive when conducting ethnography or participants observations, since otherwise one might need to construct a 'front' with, for example, what to wear and what one is doing there.

#### *How it went during the EP*

The Experience Program was in many ways a very tough week. Not only was it filled with activities, but it was also intense for me to follow along in Spanish as this is a language that I can manage on an upper-intermediate level, but if people talked very fast or if I was far away from someone speaking, I could not follow what was being said. Another factor that affected me a lot was La Guajira's weather. Every day was around 35 degrees Celsius and felt even hotter, which many times made me feel so ill that I could not participate in all activities. Instead, I needed to rest in the shade. These things made me miss certain happenings and speeches, but I do believe I got a good view of the program overall.



## 7. Findings

### 7.1 Experiential learning and possible reflecting dilemmas

In this following subsection, I will answer the first research question, “How did the EP provide EL?”. The EL we encountered during the EP will be presented according to Walter’s (2016) categories that might provoke disorienting or reflecting dilemmas: Nature, Adventure and Culture. Though, many experiences mentioned here could contain elements from more than one category.

In EL, the learner obtains personal experiences through active participation applied in real-life contexts (UNESCO 2017). Analyzing the experiences in the EP helps us to understand how some of them create opportunities for reflecting dilemmas, and how. This section provides a basis for the reader to get closer to the EP as a communication situation, which will be complemented with interviewee responses on how perspectives were changed in the section 7.2 Changes in perspectives.

#### 7.1.1 Nature

In general, the semi-arid landscapes in La Guajira provided us with stunning scenery throughout the whole EP, but some experiences stood out. The first nature experience happened already on the first day when I followed CoimpacktoB and the visiting company to ‘Playa de Camarones’ where the community ‘Los Cocos’ live and work. I described this nature experience in my field diary:

“After the community’s presentation on their customs and handcrafts, we were led to the shore, where our groups were designated a small boat and a guide. Floating in the middle of the lagoon, we saw a large flock with brightly pink Flamingos and other exotic birds, and we took turns to use the binoculars (Figure 3). We were mostly quiet, and I took the opportunity to really enjoy the stunning views and animals we had in front of us. Our boats were the only ones there, apart from a few fishermen in equally small boats further away. The guide in my boat told us some information about the animals and their behavior, but also that the lagoon is threatened because the estuary that fills it with fresh water is filled with garbage dumped by people, which makes the bottom of the lagoon rise every year. He told us that this means that the lagoon will disappear within 100 years - the birds will lose their home, the ecosystem will be ruined, and they will lose their reason to do these tours, which are the community's way of making a living.”



*Figure 3. Sailing in the middle of the lagoon. Photo: Emelie Andersson Lopez*

In this experience, we got to absorb the beautiful landscapes and wild animals, but at the same time hear about disturbing facts that threaten these lands, which are experiences that combined could, according to Walter (2016), act as a catalyst for TL. The information about the anticipated destruction of this place was disturbing to me and cultivated a sense of care for this land. In this example, verbal communication from the guide was combined with non-verbal communication with nature. As Walter (2016) points out: a disorienting dilemma can be generated when the spiritual experience of nature immersion is juxtaposed with a disturbing confrontation of its destruction. Perhaps not ‘disorienting’, but this experience created a reflecting dilemma in me.

Another outstanding nature experience happened during day 3 when we visited the community Tardes Wayúu that live right by the beach. In my field notes, I wrote:

“Me and the other participants had just taken a bath in the salty ocean, and we were sitting in a half circle listening to the community while they were inaugurating a huge urn. The sun had just set and all of a sudden, we could see thunderbolts lightening up the sky a bit further away. We could hear the loud sounds of thunder and feel how the wind got stronger and stronger, and see as the ocean also got wilder, as the intense storm got closer. It was truly a magical experience! I felt happy that the rain was about to come, since at this point, I was aware of how the water scarcity severely affected the region, its people and animals, and how the rain comes more seldom because of climate change”

In this example, we did not get to experience environmentally destructive practices. Though, I would still argue that the feelings provoked by nature (or the weather events in that specific place) were strong. All senses were stimulated, as the wind was strong, one could smell the ocean, the sound of the thunder was loud, the flashes from the lightning were calling for attention, and even our taste as the community served delicious coffee. Engaging all our senses is what Walter (2016) means could contribute to strong feelings in nature experiences. In this case, it was not only the community but also the weather and the natural surroundings (i.e. non-humans) that communicated and provided opportunities for reflections.

The final nature experience I wish to explain, happened when we got to visit the Maracarí institution. After having spent the morning watching birds in a dry forest (which was quite impressive as well), we all went to a place located right by the sea. I described it in my field diary:

“First, we came to a rustic wooden house, and right beside it, we saw around 100-1000 baby-mangrove plants in plastic bags to hold the soil together (Figure 4). The Wayúu community working with this foundation had an introduction about the importance of mangroves and the three types they were planting: red, white and black (at first, they all looked the same to me). We moved a few 100 meters to where they planted these mangroves. A string of sand created a little lagoon separating the mangrove plantations from the sea. Here, one person from each group got to plant a mangrove tree, which they afterward told me was very hard and demanding. I looked around and saw a wide, flat, dry landscape with some bushes and trees here and there, providing home for the birds flying around us. Some Flamencos were flying nearby, and I saw a huge crab walking among the mangroves in the shallow water. We got to learn that this place was once filled with mangroves, but it was all destroyed by a storm. Now, this community is working to replant all the mangroves that died in this disaster.”



*Figure 4. Mangroves ready to be planted. Photo: Emelie Andersson Lopez.*

This is another example of an event providing panoramas that created feelings of amazements combined with information about environmental destruction.

Extreme weather events will occur more often because of climate change, which made me feel worried about these types of vulnerable natural habitats, but at the same time I was also impressed by the community's agency in the matter. One of the interviewees talked about this event:

“...it also marked me quite a lot the sowing of mangrove trees, when I got here to Bogotá, they asked me, “Oh, do mangroves need to be planted?” And I’d reply, “No, mangroves don’t need to be planted; they grow naturally.” But given how critical the state of the mangroves there was, the fact that there are people planting mangrove trees one by one, to rebuild an ecosystem, really made an impact on me. [...] Mangrove trees are incredibly important to these communities because, as they said, where there is fresh



water, there are mangroves. The presence of mangrove trees and a well-preserved mangrove forest increases the fish population, which obviously makes the community's life much more prosperous. So, I felt that it was a big impact that one can make.” (interviewee 4)

In this nature experience, we did not only get to participate actively and appreciate the outlook that the mangroves, birds and water animals communicated to us, the people working at Maracarí institution also taught us about these types of ecosystems and how they could be such a crucial part of someone's livelihood. As exemplified in the quote, this event gave the opportunity for participants to reflect on the meaning behind planting mangroves in this context - how these communities are so invested in the wellbeing of their surrounding nature and how hard they work to restore it, how vulnerable the ecosystem is to natural disasters and how the community is directly dependent on this ecosystem.

#### *Conclusion: Nature Experiences*

The nature experiences in the EP show how immersive encounters with beautiful scenery, wildlife and ecological threats can evoke strong emotional responses and lead to reflections and a deeper understanding of environmental and social issues in La Guajira. The boat tour in the community of “Los Cocos” provided a mixture of gorgeous scenery, wild birds and information about ecosystem degradation, which was an experience that generated reflection and a sense of care. In Tardes Wayúu, the approaching storm by the beach created a powerful moment and gave the opportunity for the participants to reflect on water scarcity and climate change. At the Macarí institution where we planted mangroves, they made us aware of the ecosystem's role in livelihoods and of the hard work behind restoration. Walter's (2016) describe these situations of nature immersion as potential catalysts for TL, particularly when beauty and destruction are contrasted, and when strong emotions are evoked.

#### **7.1.2 Adventure**

The EP also included many adventures for the participants. One of these was the cable way, driven by manpower, that we rode to get to the community in Jasaishao. In order to reach the community we were about to visit, we had to cross a ten meters wide river, about five meters down from the cliffs - with this “Carruja” as they call it (Figure 5). It was a simple, rusty steel carriage hanging on rusty steel wires. An older man from the community was sitting on one side, and dragged the handles of the wagon to make it move towards the other side. We visitors got to sit on the other side of him, or on the planks in the middle. There were no security measurements to belt yourself up, and if you would fall off - you would probably die, as someone also told me before jumping onto the rusty steel carriage. In my field diary, I wrote: “It was fun but also so scary to cross the river.

It made me think that this is something they probably do all the time, since it's the only way of getting to their community - what a difference to how we commute at home!". This adventure experience included sensations such as thrill, fear, rush and risk. For a disorienting dilemma to happen in adventure experiences, these feelings are usually present, as well as physical and mental challenges (Walter 2016). In this case, the physical challenge was to hold on to the Carruja and stay balanced, and the mental challenge was to overcome the fear of heights. I observed many participants showing excitement, thrill, and sometimes fear when getting up on the Carruja. The apparent risks and lack of safety measures confronted us with a reality that is very different from what we are used to in our daily lives in the cities. It provided us with an opportunity for reflection regarding the community's everyday reality, since this precarious crossing is probably not an adventure experience, but rather a necessity in terms of mobility.



*Figure 5. The 'Carruja'. Photo: Emelie Andersson Lopez.*

Later on, that same day in the community of Jasaishao, I wrote in my field diary about when we got another physical challenge when we got to plant mango trees in the arid ground:

“We were first introduced to the process, and then divided in groups to perform different tasks such as collecting water, collecting compost, etc. When every group had fetched their component, some of the visitors had to work the soil with spades. As the soil was filled with bugs, mosquitoes and ants, many of them had bites all over their legs. I could not participate as I was melting from the sun even though I was standing in the shadow, and the ones from the visiting company who did contribute were exhausted in the end. One person had to see the nurse of the visiting company, as they felt ill because of the heat. When the soil was done, we all planted our own mango tree - which some of the facilitators from CoimpactoB and some people from the community repeatedly had us feeling proud about!”

As this might not be an obvious adventure experience, it was still a physical and mental challenge for the visitors as they had to endure the hot weather combined with this task. It also contained a sense of thrill and risk, according to my impressions. The thrill came from the gratifying moment of working hard for something meaningful (giving fruit to this community), and the risk came from the feelings of extreme exhaustion for the body to do this work. One of the facilitators of CoimpactoB told me that the idea behind these tasks is to have the visitors to really understand how the work can be like for people in these communities, which I believe they succeeded with since the experience contrasted with the participants’ usual work environments. Several of the interviewees mentioned this experience as impactful. One of them reflected on it this way:

“If you can plant trees and mango trees in the desert, I think there are so many tools and possibilities today that we can do in the cities, we have so many resources too. So that's the main thing. You can be very resilient with very few advantages.” (Interviewee 2)

This quote shows that this adventure experience made interviewee 2 reflect on this community’s environmental work and what could be possible in the cities. Obtaining an embodied experience of what it means practically to plant trees in the desert provided a reflecting dilemma on the resilience required to sustain plantations in such an environment, which led to a reconsideration of the access to resources in the cities.

### *Conclusion: Adventure Experiences*

These examples are not typical events that you associate with adventure experiences, such as extreme sports or wilderness survival. However, they do show similarities to Walter’s (2016) description of Adventure experiences as they involve physical and mental challenges, and as they could evoke emotions like thrill, fear, rush and risk. All the experiences mentioned in this category could

also be categorized as cultural experiences, but since they were more physically and mentally demanding, I placed them as adventurous. The “carruja”- ride was a risky but exciting experience, which provided an opportunity for reflections regarding the community’s reality in contrast to one’s own. Planting mango trees in extremely warm weather challenged the participants' physical endurance and had the interviewees reflect on the resilience of the community and the resources people in the city have. These are examples of when EL could evoke reflecting dilemmas - without interpersonal communication - as it made us aware of a reality that is very different from the participants. Although I cannot declare how these experiences affected the participants long term, Walter (2016) theorizes that outdoor adventure experiences might develop attributes like self-confidence and environmental awareness.

### 7.1.3 Culture

This category is the most extensive one, since the EP provided us with a range of experiences to get to know the Wayúu culture. Walter (2016) describes culture experiences as normally including homestays with local families, which the EP did not, since we lived in hostels in Riohacha and Manaure. Despite this, me and the other participants still had several cross-cultural encounters with the various communities that could be related to his description of this category. Overall, we obtained a broad understanding of the Wayúu culture because of the range of experiences we got to live, as one of the interviewee’s expressed and explained:

“I saw really good logistics behind it because they (CoimpactoB) thought of everything: how the economy works, the topic of gastronomy, cultural aspects, education, agriculture, we got to experience a bit of everything. So, having that diversity in the range of spaces that we had, really enriched the experience.” (interviewee 5)

Cultural experiences include when tourists are exposed to the local language, customs and worldviews (Walter 2016). In many of the communities, we learned a few words in the Wayúu people’s language, Wayuunaiki. Some of the communities started their introduction with the leaders giving a welcoming speech to the participants. They spoke Wayuunaiki, and someone (in their own community) translated into Spanish. Interviewee 4 reflected on the experience from the Jasaishao community, and said: “There was the higher authority, which was a woman, and there was another authority, the man who was her translator. It was remarkable that there was fluid communication between them and that they could communicate with us”. Further, they also explained to me how this communication allowed this community to share their stories, to show and explain aspects of their culture. In my interpretation, this interviewee did not expect the participants and the communities to understand each other so well, but when experiencing the communication and translation of this community, it showed that



we can have a meaningful exchange through verbal communication. It opened the possibility to reflect on the communication between two different ‘worlds’ and how this communication could work in practice.

We were taught the Wayúu traditional dance ‘Yonna’ and how they practice it in community events, and we also tried some traditional games. One of them we got to try in three different communities: a race where you had to push a piece of cactus shaped into a type of wheel with a stick, about 10 meters forward and then back, and the fastest one wins. In Tardes Wayúu we got to try even more games, such as competing on who could shoot with bow and arrow the furthest, and we were also betting on donkeys doing a race (Figure 6).



*Figure 6. Donkey in Tardes Wayúu. Photo: Emelie Andersson Lopez.*

Interviewee 4 reflected on this experience and told me what stood out to them:

“In Tardes Wayúu, it also seemed interesting to me to see how the whole community joined together. Everyone made time, and everyone participated, from children riding donkeys in races to the elders of the community. The *palabrerros*\* were teaching us how to shoot with a bow. I found it interesting that the young people could bring together children and elders, ensuring that everyone contributed in some way to giving the tourists the best possible experience.” (interviewee 4)

\* To explain them in a simplified way: An authority in the Wayúu culture who resolves conflicts and can also act as a mediator.

In this quote, I interpret that it was not only the activities per se that offered the experience, but it was also seeing the interaction between the Wayúu internally and towards the visitors, and their ways of including the entire community in the execution of the activities. This example also shows that the visitors got an insight into the values of the community, since we got to experience how this community valued everyone's presence - meaning that learning about a culture in CBET isn't just transmitted verbally but also by observing through community immersion. In other words, we visitors experienced community events, and at the same time we learned about customs and habits, since their way of being and acting also communicated something we could make meaning from.

Another culture experience that stood out to me, which is quite rare for a tourist experience, was the visit to the school 'Ethno Education center Ishashimana'. Here, we first got an inspiring talk from the principle (more about this talk in the next chapter under 'Community and pride'), and then we were divided into our groups and one of the students led us through five stations with different activities: we picked "Moringa"-leaves as the student told us about their medicinal properties and what they use them for, we danced Yonna, we had a technology class where we learned how to light up a lamp with a battery, steel wire and coupling clamp, we had a "tejido"-class where we did crafts in their traditional way and lastly the cactus race. One of the interviewees reflected on the school experience like this:

“I think I've repeated it quite a bit because it was one of the most beautiful experiences - being in a school and seeing how it works, how they learn, how they are taught, [...] the classrooms without doors, just open spaces (Figure 7). And being able to get to know even a small part of such important aspects of the culture made the whole experience much richer.” (interviewee 5)



*Figure 7. A classroom in a Wayúu school. Photo: Emelie Andersson Lopez.*

Many elements of this school experience gave us opportunities to reflect, as shown in this quote. A lot of the things we got to experience in this school contrasted to the typical schools that we are used to seeing in the cities. This contrast was communicated to us verbally and non-verbally as the students and the teachers showed us how things work, and through the learning-by-doing activities and physical surroundings. The overall school experience gave the participants opportunities to reflect on what a school could mean in a different context, and what schools are supposed to teach.

#### *Conclusion: Culture Experiences*

The cultural learning in the EP was broad rather than deep, as we only engaged with each community for a short period and did not stay over. Apart from the criteria regarding experiencing homestays with local families, the experiences I've just mentioned align with Walter's (2016) description of cultural experiences in CBET since it included interactions with the local people, community events and participation in their everyday activities. We learned the local language, customs and worldviews, which Walter (2016) means that tourists normally are exposed to in culture experiences. Beyond learning about the Wayúu people's language, living conditions, traditional games, dances, events and education, we also got to experience how the Wayúu communities interact, organize themselves and manifest cultural values. For example, the participation of all generations in Tardes Wayúu reflected the notion that cultural experiences are not only

transmitted through structured activities but also through immersion in everyday life. All the verbal and non-verbal communication from the conversations, presentations and learning-by-doing activities, as well as the communication from the physical surroundings, can also make great impressions, and in turn potentially create reflecting dilemmas. Cultural experiences can challenge the meaning perspectives of the visitors, which is what could trigger a disorienting dilemma (Taylor 1994 in Walter 2016). The Wayúu people's culture in contrast to where I or the other participants come from generated reflections that illustrate how cultural encounters in CBET could bring an awareness regarding different ways of thinking and living. In other words, our meaning perspectives were challenged.

## 7.2 Changes in perspectives

The visits to the various Wayúu communities in La Guajira did not only give the participants new experiences, but it also gave them new perspectives. In this section, I will analyze how the interviewees resonated regarding their experiences and hence answer research question 2: How did the participants critically reflect on their previous assumptions and discuss new perspectives, in connection to the EP? As mentioned, I found four themes in which the participants' perspectives changed, through which I will present my findings for this research question. To protect the interviewees from being identified, I will use the pronoun "they/them" for all interviewees.

### 7.2.1 Reputation, behavior and way of life

Some of the interviewees told me that La Guajira and its people have a negative reputation for some. They also mentioned that they assumed that people who live there are very poor. Only one interviewee mentioned their assumptions about the Wayúu to be carriers of ancestral knowledge, and as people who are very important for the environment. A few of the interviewees had been to La Guajira before, not to visit the communities, but instead the more touristy beaches. They mentioned that these previous visits to La Guajira did not at all include insights into the Wayúu culture as the EP did.

One interviewee told me that they expected the Wayúu to live and act differently, assuming the Wayúu people would be more "hostile", but with the EP this changed. They put it: "My perspective changed completely. So, afterward (after the EP) I didn't see them as being hostile. They are kind, friendly, they are gentle" (Interviewee 1). Furthermore, the same person said they learned to not judge people from how they look, where they come from or their culture, and that "each person has a story to tell". The final statement in this example suggests a more open and inclusive perspective and could perhaps indicate not only a shifted view of the Wayúu but also a broader appreciation for diversity. A similar change

in perspectives happened to another interviewee, who explained that, according to themselves, indigenous groups for some people have a negative connotation because they come off as “dangerous people (...) because they do not adjust to the same laws”. They continued by stating that “the biggest lesson I’m taking away is the change in perception about the idiosyncrasies of the Wayúu people” (interviewee 4). This shows two examples of how the EP changed their *points of view*. In other words: for the interviewees, “the constellation of belief, value judgment, attitude, and feeling that shapes a particular interpretation” (Mezirow 1997, p. 6), changed. This shift illustrates subjective reframing, as described by Mezirow (2000), since the interviewees critically reflected on their own assumptions.

Another interviewee told me a more detailed story of their previous assumptions and how they got new perspectives from the EP:

“Here in Bogotá, there are also people from La Guajira, but the type of work they do here is very different from what you see in La Guajira. [...] It was a huge change because, for example, in Bogotá, when someone from a La Guajira community comes here, wearing their traditional clothing and practicing their beliefs, you usually see them on the streets, sitting and selling their crafts, or children dancing, exposed to the sun or rain. Then going to La Guajira and seeing that they are a community, a society that takes care of each other, was very different from the perspective you get in the city.” (interviewee 3)

This example shows that the interviewee had certain expectations regarding what it means to be Wayúu but was surprised by seeing their ways of life in La Guajira. They got aware of their own assumptions, realized they were not true, and gained several new points of views when seeing that Wayúu people have various ways of sustaining themselves and taking care of each other.

The interviewees also got to critically reflect on their own assumptions regarding the economic status of the communities and the area:

“When we talk about the department of La Guajira, it has been one of the most affected departments in Colombia, very impacted by resource issues and how these are allocated by the government. So, the vision that we have in the rest of the country in Colombia, is that La Guajira is a territory with many deficiencies, and when I arrived to this experience, [...] getting much closer to understanding them, to their essence, I realize that there aren’t as many deficiencies as people tend to believe. I saw a very rich department in many ways” (Interviewee 5)

In this example, the interviewee had certain assumptions on what it means to live in a poor area with few resources, and was surprised by what they saw during the EP. As another interviewee put it: they felt that the Wayúu are rich “in their way of being, as people, as human beings” (interviewee 3). It seems like the EP had the visitors’ reevaluating things in life, realizing that money is not the only source of richness. This new point of view could have the interviewees critically reflect



on what it means to live without the resources and the commodities most people in the cities live with - that the lack of these material things is not equal to, e.g. misery or helplessness. The reframing of the economic situation in La Guajira offers a more nuanced understanding of economic scarcity, allowing the interviewees to see value in other aspects. Additionally, this reflection occurred through subjective reframing (Mezirow 2000), as the interviewees critically reflected on their own previous assumptions.

#### *Conclusion: Reputation, behavior and way of life*

The EP made the interviewees realize their preconceived notions, associating the Wayúu people with poverty, hostility or marginalization. They obtained several new points of views through subjective reframing as their own previous assumptions were challenged in the EP - regarding the Wayúu people's behavior and ways of being, how they live and take care of each other as a community, and regarding what it means to live with few resources (perceived wealth is not only about money or materialistic things).

### 7.2.2 Women leaders

A key insight that surprised the participants of the EP was the women's role in the Wayúu communities, as they appeared as leaders and important actors. Many of the participants explained that the culture in Colombia is often perceived as "machista" (macho/sexist), but as they got to know the different communities, they thought this was not the case of the Wayúu. One of the interviewees reflected on the role of the women and that it could foster "good behaviors", seen in this example:

"The other thing that I saw, and this shocked me is that women have a very important role in these communities. That doesn't happen very often in other indigenous communities. I've visited some in the Amazonas and in the Pacific, and this is the first community that I see that women are so empowered. And when you see this change of empowerment, you also see a lot of good behaviors and good traditions." (interviewee 2)

The EP provided this person with new points of views as they assumed that women in indigenous communities generally do not have power positions, but in the EP the interviewee perceived not only women in power but also how women make positive impacts on their community when they have a larger space to operate.

Another interviewee was not expecting to see women having a prominent role in the communities, and they critically reflected on their own assumptions, as shown in this example:

“When we, as foreigners, or “Alijuna” (non-indigenous) as they would call us, get to know them through what we read, it is not the same when you are already there, and you experience them more closely. I had a concept about the Wayúu community from a very Western view, in which we interpret their forms or dynamics of the community as we call them here in Colombia as “machistas”, when men are more active in the community. And when I think about what we lived through the experience, I realize that women play a very important role in the community, and how these dynamics are given internally, (...) So, I was very interested in seeing the active participation that women have. I think we had the opportunity to see many women leaders.” (interviewee 5)

By seeing women leaders, rather than relying on the information they read, this person was able to challenge their previous points of views regarding the gender roles in these communities. Mezirow (2000) means that TL strives to make us aware of how we have obtained our (produced) “knowledge”. In this example, the participant also reflected on from where they had gained their preconceived notion (“through what we read”).

As they became aware of their previous assumptions, of where these might come from and how new experiences have reshaped their beliefs, this allowed for interviewee 5 to go through what Mezirow (2000) describes as subjective reframing.

#### *Conclusion: Women leaders*

As shown in this subsection, the EP generated critical reflections regarding gender roles in Wayúu communities, particularly challenging the perception that indigenous communities are mostly male dominated. Seeing women leaders who are actively participating in community life made the participants reconsider their expectations regarding women's role and gained new points of views.

### **7.2.3 Environmental work**

The participants learned a lot about how the Wayúu approach environmental issues and how they connect with nature. For one person, this led to a change in how they viewed the Wayúu people in general, as shown in this example: “We also delved into the experience of learning more about the environment. This helps one become more aware of the environment, its importance, and also, for the future, it gives you a new perspective on the people from that area” (interviewee 1). As this example shows, the interviewee did not associate the Wayúu with environmental practices before the program, but during the EP they gained new point of views on how the Wayúu interacts with and care for their natural surroundings. This participant gained an environmental awareness and at the same time reconsidered their general perception regarding the Wayúu people.

Several interviewees expressed that they were amazed by the reforestation work of the Jasaishao community, and how they were planting mangoes in the desert. Many also mentioned the visit to the Maracarí institution as impactful,

where we got to plant mangroves. One person reflected about the reasons behind their hard work and effort to recover an ecosystem:

“To think that this was their job every day, to what they dedicate themselves to daily, and that they don’t have an objective of profit, but it is a contribution to their land. To me, that seemed really beautiful, and I think it is something that we could really learn from.” (interviewee 5)

In this example, the interviewee assumed that profit is normally the reason behind people’s labor. Seeing that people in this institution are working hard for something that is not going to give them a direct financial income, but instead they are working unselfishly to take care of nature, this gave the interviewee a new point of view and inspiration to act differently.

Another person reflected on the meanings that the Wayúu people give to certain things:

“[...] they have a different vision of what they think about when you talk about development. It's not just economic growth, but they have so many traditions, ongoing, that we have to think from our perspective that development is not just building a house with the right materials, but respecting those materials that they're using, why they're using them, and what is the meaning behind every construction.” (interviewee 2)

This interviewee realized that economic growth is not the only important factor in development, and the Wayúu provided new perspectives on what it means to grow and develop. This person could also grasp that a project such as building a house could have room for spiritual meanings and values as well.

Another person that I interviewed told me the story from the community of Jasaishao, where we planted mangoes. When they went with their group and a woman from the community to pick up dry leaves for the soil, they asked if there were any bees in the area, and the Wayúu woman said yes, pointed at a honeycomb in a tree nearby, and offered them to bring down some honey.

“So that was like, wow, for them, it is normal to go up there, disturbing the bees, take down honey just like that, but for us, it is not... and without protection or anything. She said, ‘if you want, I pick up a little jar, shake the honeycomb and leave them dizzy and in that way I can pick up the honey’. And I did not (say yes), because of her safety. But they see it as something normal, like, without gloves, without clothes, without anything... I feel like that is also part of that connection they have with nature.” (interviewee 3)

When I asked interviewee 3 if they thought this experience would change the way they think or act in the future, they responded:



“Maybe my thoughts, right? Maybe not in how I act because I don’t see another feasible scenario. [...] I do think it will stay in my memory forever that they did it so calmly.”  
(interviewee 3)

I interpret this event as an example of objective reframing, which Mezirow (2000) explains when the learner critically reflects on others assumptions when situated in a narrative or in a problem-solving group task. The interviewee in this case reflected on the assumptions of the Wayúu woman that there would not be any problems or danger to approach the honeycomb, and although they did not appropriate the assumption, they obtained a new point of view on how the Wayúu have a stronger connection to nature in comparison to the people from the cities.

In a different scenario, another interviewee obtained new perspectives regarding the innovative projects from the first community, “Los Cocos”, where we took the boat to see Flamingos and other birds. After the boat ride, we were introduced to the hand crafts from the women in the community. They told us how they took garbage and recycled it to make sewing threads, by which they made hand crafts such as bags or table cloth. I noted in my field diary how I thought it was amazing to realize that the beautiful bags that were nicely hanging in the trees we sat under, were made from recycled plastic. Interviewee 5 reflected on this matter, as they told me:

“So, a great reflection of that, which caught my attention, is that they transformed garbage into art, into weaving, into an opportunity to redefine the value of things and I think that is where they are having a great impact, and it is something that transformed my mentality about their culture.” (interviewee 5)

This example shows how the interviewee obtained a new point of view by critically reflecting on their previous assumptions regarding waste and its value. The interviewee may have perceived garbage as something without worth from before, but in this experience, they came to see how it could be transformed into something valuable - both economically and artistically. Later in the interview, this person started reflecting on what they themselves could act on:

“This community that we visited, can't directly control the fact that people don't recycle their garbage, right? [...] So if they say my limit is that people have garbage it's always going to be a limit, but they (the women of this community) don't focus on people throwing garbage, they focus on the garbage that is already there and that's what they can influence. [...] Symbolically, we all have that garbage there with which we can do something different. So that's how. I focus on what I can influence, and I start to generate transformation through that.” (interviewee 5)

This statement illustrates subjective reframing as the interviewee started to reflect on the factors that can hinder action and acknowledges that one usually assumes there is nothing to be done when external factors create a problem (people’s

failure to recycle). Mezirow (2000) means that critical reflection allows people to question their assumptions that are taken for granted. In this case, the interviewee reflected on how one would usually see the limitations, but when seeing what the community “Los Cocos” did with their garbage, they realized that there are ways to find opportunities in all kinds of problem-solving tasks.

#### *Conclusion: Environmental work*

As argued here, the EP provided various new points of views regarding the Wayúu community’s environmental commitments and connection with nature. The interviewees reflected on how the Wayúu work to take care of ecosystems and not just for profit, how they give meaning to development and materials, how they are connected to their natural environment and not afraid (to approach bees) and how they act on what they can influence. These shifts in the interviewees' understanding happened through both subjective reframing as the EP had them reflect on their own assumptions, but also through objective reframing when they considered new ways of approaching nature (specifically bees) without appropriating this way of acting.

### 7.2.4 Community and pride

Another very impactful lesson regarding the Wayúu culture, which was an eye-opener for the interviewees, is that they dedicate a lot of their time and effort for their community. As one of the interviewee’s put it: “What we learned from the Wayúu is that they work as one. They work as a community” (interviewee 2). Their community and culture were also something the Wayúu showed great pride in.

Situations that made them reflect on the Wayúu people’s dedication to their community usually arose in conversation or when the participants got to listen to people talking. One example that one brought up is the speech that the principal of the school gave us:

“I remember the story that the school principal told us, that she decided to sacrifice her dream of being a nurse and working in a hospital to become a teacher and the principal of the school. And it seemed very fascinating to me that in this community they have the possibility of abandoning their personal project in favor of the community project. At least I wouldn’t be able to do it.” (interviewee 4)

When I asked this person if this new information had changed the way they think before, they replied:

“I don’t feel like this could change the way I think or the way I approach life. But it certainly gives me a new point of view and helps me recognize that there are lives more oriented towards the community rather than the individual. It’s interesting to know that this exists.” (interviewee 4)

This illustrates objective reframing, as explained by Mezirow (2000), where the learner critically reflects on others' assumptions instead of their own. The interviewee acknowledges another perspective where the community's well-being is prioritized over personal aspirations, as they were exposed to a new worldview in which the collective good is valued higher and recognizes it as an alternative way of thinking.

Another reflection arose from a conversation with a teenage Wayúu boy:

"I asked him why he wanted to study digital marketing. And he told me: 'because Guajira has so much to teach, and I want to learn how to bring it (the knowledge) to the world.' [...] There are many people who, when they have resources, what they do is they leave the country, right? They leave and forget their roots. And to see people who, on the contrary, want to strengthen their knowledge in order to return it to the community [...] And it made me question myself, what am I doing for my community?." (interviewee 5)

This conversation made interviewee 5 aware that there are other ways of approaching the place you come from. They had the assumption that most people would leave the country if they could, which changed. This new point of view seemed to generate a reflecting dilemma for interviewee 5, as they began to critically assess their own relationship with their community and their role within it.

A similar situation happened to another interviewee, who reflected on their assumptions on the reason behind what we do, as they talked to a boy at the school:

"Generally, when I ask someone here in Bogotá, or even my own answer, what one wants to study, what one wants to become in life, it's like: 'because in this matter I can become a specialist in this, and then make... I don't know how many million pesos'. And for me, that's the idea, but [...] he wanted to bring the robot things to his community, so that the students have the opportunity to learn with new technologies." (interviewee 4)

For interviewee 4, as they heard the boy's response, it made them reassess their belief that people's main motivation (at least in Bogotá) is money and personal success and got a new point of view when realizing that the aspiration for community development could be someone's main motivation. They continued to describe how they felt because they did not think in the same community-terms: "I felt a little selfish, because I don't normally think about those kinds of things". In this case, I interpret interviewee 4 as having feelings of shame, which are emotions that are common in a TL process and deserve attention as meaning perspectives are being challenged (Singer-Brodowsky 2023).

All interviewees were inspired by the Wayúu people's way of prioritizing and praising their culture and community. Two of them also mentioned that it would

be hard to bring these new perspectives and ways of living to the city, As shown in these two examples:

“The most important thing that they offered us, is that we should all be united. We are all one. Nature, animal, man, we are all united. The importance of uniting us in our own community, which I see as a bit difficult, because the city is very agitated, everyone is having their thoughts divided.” (interviewee 3)

“Sometimes you think that if you decided to focus on a community goal before your own goals, one would be the only one doing that. I mean, one would feel like one is the only one taking that effort and no one else is.” (interviewee 4)

In both examples, the interviewee reflects on the collective mindset of the Wayúu but struggles to see how it could be applied in the cities. Their assumptions that people from the city are more divided or would never make an effort for the community, create an internal conflict between appreciating these new community-orienting perspectives and recognizing the barriers to apply it in their own lives. In this case, the dilemma seems to be not only reflecting but also disorienting, as the interviewees could not find a way to apply these new perspectives in their daily lives.

#### *Conclusion: Community and pride*

The EP exposed participants to the Wayúu people’s sense of community and cultural pride when seeing and hearing them discuss what they have done in their lives or what their aspirations are. These new points of view challenged the interviewees previous assumptions that people are normally individualistic. In turn, one of the interviewees reflected on their own role in their own community through subjective reframing. Two other interviewees experienced objective reframing, and perhaps even disorienting dilemmas, when considering applying these perspectives in their own city-context, which they believed would be difficult. In Mezirow’s (2000) concept about perspective transformation, learning does not always mean adopting a new belief but rather becoming aware of alternative ways of interpreting reality, as these examples show.

## 8. Discussion

I have explored EL and changes in perspectives that occurred in the communication situation of the EP. In this section, I will discuss my findings and what the participants' cross-cultural learnings may imply in a larger context.

The findings regarding EL in CBET tell us that communication is not bound to interpersonal dialogues. When seeing communication as constitutive by embracing the meaning we make of verbal- and non-verbal communication (Pezzullo & Cox 2018), this allows for understanding how nature, adventure and culture experiences can also communicate something to us from which we make meaning - without another human explicitly telling us something. Immersing ourselves in a culture event, riding a Carruja or being taken away by stunning panoramas could also foster reflecting dilemmas (Walter 2016). Furthermore, the categorization of experiences within the EP is not always clear, since many activities could contain elements from multiple categories. For example, cultural experiences like the traditional race with rolling cactuses primarily reflect cultural learning, but they could also be adventurous because of the excitement and physical engagement they imply. In the same way, the boat tour which included flamingo-watching was an obvious nature experience, though for some of the participants this experience seemed to evoke feelings of fear and thrill as we were in the middle of the lagoon on a rocking boat, hence aligning aspects of adventure tourism. This overlap in categories means that TL in CBET is not limited to firm categories, but instead it depends on individual perceptions and emotional responses. Instead of viewing the categories as distinct, it could perhaps be more useful to see them as aspects of a learning experience, whereas the different elements in an experience could contribute to shifts in participants' perspectives and worldviews.

The analysis of the participant's perspective changes reflects how the Wayúu people inspired them in many ways. The participants gained several new points of views as they perceived kindness, that one can appear rich though not having many resources, how their women are more empowered, how they are connected to and work hard to take care of their natural surroundings, and how they are invested in the benefit of their community rather than individualistic - promoting admirable values to us visitors. The shift in perspectives happened mostly through subjective reframing as the participants critically reflected on their own assumptions, but in some cases also through objective reframing when they reflected on Wayúu people's assumptions without appropriating them (Mezirow (2000)). These two ways of reframing are what constitutes a TL process. Perhaps, more cases of objective reframing occurred, where participants reflected on and discussed others' assumptions without adopting them. However, since my

interview questions focused on their own learning, the interviewees may have for the most part shared insights they found personally applicable.

Building on the premise that the nature-, adventure- and culture experiences were absorbed by the participants, and that reflecting or disorienting dilemmas were generated in them, these experiences could lead to a change in the participants' structure of meaning, which is what constitute our frame of reference (Walter 2016; Boström et al. 2018, Mezirow 2000). Similarly, as the participants gained several new points of view, their frame of reference transformed (Mezirows 1997). This in turn will provide the context for the participants' future experiences and how to appropriate them (Boström et al. 2018, Mezirow 2000). We cannot know whether the reflecting dilemmas or critical assessment of assumption would lead to a lasting change in their frame of reference, or a full 'transformation'. Perhaps a five-day journey wouldn't inspire drastic changes in their long-term behaviors or thinking. But as I have argued in this thesis, the EP could spark the beginning of a reflective process which could contribute to a broader awareness of their own and others' worldview. Future research on TL in CBET could benefit from conducting interviews both before and after the experience, to gain a clearer understanding of how the participants' perspectives evolved and dig deeper into what exactly triggered these shifts. In addition, a follow-up study could provide valuable insights into the long-term impact of these kinds of programs, which would help to assess whether any perspective shifts led to lasting changes in attitudes or behaviors related to sustainability.

As mentioned in the section "Previous research", Sen & Walter (2020) proclaim that not many studies have connected TL with tourism. Their study investigates hosts' perspectives in a Cambodian CBET project. They found that the hosts experienced TL in topics like environmental conservation, since the visitors made them reflect on the value of their surrounding environment and transformed their view of forest conservation practices, leading to them stopping their logging. In the EP, it was rather the visitors that were inspired by the hosts when it came to environmental awareness. Clearly, visitors and hosts learnings are not comparable, but I believe this also indicates how learning can differ depending on the location and context of the CBET-program. In the study of Knollenberg et al. (2014), regarding TL in volunteer tourism, they show how stepping into a new environment, combined with several new points of views, can teach the tourists to better understand complex issues such as poverty and to combat reinforced stereotypes. This could lead to consciousness- raising experiences for participants (ibid). Similarly, the EP generated reflections on what it means to live with few resources and how people can still be perceived as rich, and that the Wayúu people did not act in ways they would assume before the program. The EP also included many experiences that opened possibilities for consciousness raising. For example, the first nature experience mentioned in my

findings: the flamingo tour and the guide that told us about how the lagoon, birds and the community's livelihood are threatened because of human activities. Although CBET and volunteer tourism have differing conditions, since the latter means that the visitors come to their destination with the purpose of doing volunteer work, these two types of tourism seem to generate similar learning outcomes.

In the introduction of this thesis, I argued why it is necessary to learn from indigenous peoples when it comes to climate change related issues. As my findings show, CBET-programs like the EP can help us foster a more nuanced understanding of indigenous people, of their perspectives and of ourselves. Though, as mentioned by Guerrero-Moreno & Oliviera Junior (2014) research has shown that CBET is not without risk since it could lead to unequal resource distribution, cultural harm and other socio-economic challenges. As Canessa (2018 in Goyes & South 2021) also points out, it is not advisable to romanticize or oversimplify their perspectives either or collapse all indigenous groups into one as if they were all the same (Goyes & South 2021). Therefore, I believe it would be interesting for future research on learning in CBET with the Wayúu to bring forward the hosts' perceptions to understand how they reflect on the knowledge exchange with visitors.

As Guerrero-Moreno & Oliviera-Junior (2024) propose: studying the topic of perceptions and experiences in CBET provides important information about its success and sustainability. My findings in this study imply how the participants had the chance to learn some of UNESCO's (2017) key competencies for sustainable development. By immersing themselves in a new environment and engaging with people from a different culture, it provided opportunities for them to build on their critical thinking competency, as this includes being able to critically examine established norms, practices and viewpoints and to reflect on one's own beliefs, perspectives and actions. The EP also allowed them to practice self-awareness for sustainability, which means to be able to reflect on one's role in the local community and global community, for example when one of the interviewee's asked themselves "What am I doing for my community?".

## 9. Conclusion

The aim of this master thesis project was to explore cross-cultural learning for the participants in the EP in La Guajira and contribute to an understanding of how EL and TL could manifest in a CBET- setting such as in La Guajira. Here live the Wayúu people - one of the few indigenous populations in Colombia that have been able to maintain their language, culture and relative autonomy.

Through participant observations and interviews, I analyzed the experiences that me and the other participants obtained in the EP, through the lens of Walter's (2016) categories nature-, adventure-, and culture experiences. In my findings, I discuss how the experiences sparked reflections that could work as a catalyst for TL, and how these 'reflecting dilemmas' were not only generated through interpersonal communication, but also through communication with non-humans.

I also analyzed the interviewees' changes in perspectives and discussed how the participants critically reflected on their previous assumptions and discussed their new points of views regarding the Wayúu people's a) reputation, behavior and way of life, b) women leaders, c) environmental work and d) community and pride. Their shift in perspectives happened mostly through subjective reframing, as the participants critically reflected on their own assumptions, but also through objective reframing, when they reflected on others' assumptions.

I wish to highlight the potential for these cross-cultural engagements to foster awareness and perspective shifts. I believe that experiencing a new and different cultural setting is always valuable. However, as I argue in the introduction of this thesis, it may be particularly meaningful to immerse oneself in a setting where indigenous communities live, as their perspectives can inspire lifestyles that are in greater harmony with the environment.

Because of time and other constraints, this project did not allow me to assess the long-term transformations for the participants, and neither was I able to interview the hosts in the communities we visited. I suggest that future research could explore how the participants' perspectives lasted or evolved over time, and how the host communities perceive this knowledge exchange, in order to deepen our understanding of additional aspects of learning in CBET.



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# Popular science summary

Thinking of sustainability education, perhaps having experiences with indigenous people is not the first thing that comes to mind. As the world deals with environmental and social crises, I wish to show with my thesis how learning from indigenous communities offer valuable lessons for sustainability and foster collective well-being.

In my thesis project, I went to La Guajira in northern Colombia and joined an ‘Experience Program’ facilitated by CoimpactoB. Here live the Wayúu people, one of Colombia’s largest indigenous groups. Historically, these people have been able to maintain their language and cultural practices, and are relatively autonomous in comparison to other indigenous groups. During this week-long program, which I define as community-based ecotourism (CBET), me and the other participants from Medellín and Bogotá got to visit five different communities and one school. The experiences we had gave rise to awareness, critical thinking and self-reflection - which are key competencies for sustainable development.

As methods, I did participant observations during the Experience Program, and afterward I conducted interviews with some of the participants. By using the framework of transformative learning theory and the three categories of Experiential learning in CBET, I analyzed the experiences and how the participants gained new perspectives.

My findings were divided into two parts. In the first part I discuss how nature, adventure and culture experiences provided conditions for so-called ‘reflecting dilemmas’, which could lead to an increased awareness of one’s own and other’s worldviews. These conditions did not only include interpersonal conversations, but also interactions with the environment and non-human elements. In the second part, I present how the participants talk about their assumptions, and how they gained new points of view. To begin with, the interviewees realized their own prejudice regarding the Wayúu people and formed new perceptions, now seeing them as kind, as caring for their community and as “rich in their way of being”. The participants reflected on the women’s role in the community, as they did not expect to see women leaders. Furthermore, the Wayúu people inspired with their environmental work, as the participants reflected on their dedication to take care of nature, how they gave meaning to materials, and how they took action on a garbage issue and made art from it. Lastly, the participants reflected on the Wayúu people’s sense of community, though, they also reflected on the difficulty of applying this mindset in the cities.

With these insights, organizations like CoimpactoB could take inspiration when designing their CBET-programs to improve the learning experience for sustainability. Also, I hope this thesis will spark an interest for indigenous people's knowledge systems.

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# Appendix 1

## Interview guide

*ENGLISH:*

### **Warm up questions:**

- Was this the first time you visited Guajira?
- What do you think was the purpose of you joining the experience program?
- What were you excited about before the program? What were your expectations?
- Before the program, what did you hope you were going to learn?

### **Learnings**

- Can you tell me about some of the learnings that you will take away from this Experience Program?
- What new perspectives do you feel you have gained from this program, and in what situations did they arise?
  - How have these new perspectives influenced your previous ways of thinking?
- In what ways do you think these new perspectives might be useful to you in the future?
  - Do you think something could hinder the use of these new perspectives?

### **Memorable moment**

- Can you tell me about something during the Experience program that has stayed with you?
  - follow up: What are your thoughts on this/these situations? /What did you feel when this happened? (feelings)
  - Why do you think you felt that way? (thoughts)
  - Do you think this lesson or experience will change the way you think or act in the future? (transformation)
    - Why?/Why not?
    - Do you think there is anything that will make this hard to change? / In other words, do you think there is anything that could come in the way of this change?

**New points of view**

- Can you tell me about a moment in the experience program when you got to learn about different points of view from other people involved in the program?
  - Follow up: tell me more about this situation (when)
  - How did you feel in this situation? (feelings)
  - Were there any new perspectives from this situation that you will take with you for the future? (potential transformation)
    - How? (will you use this new perspective in the future in practice?)

**Reflexion sessions**

- What did you think about the various reflection sessions we had during the experience program?
  - Was there any specific moment in these reflection sessions with the others that made an impact on you?
  - How/Why?
- Do you think the knowledge exchange in the Experience Program can be improved somehow?
- Is there anything else you would like to add?

**Questioning your own perspectives – (If there is time)**

- Did you experience any conversation or activity in the experience program where you got to question your own perspectives?
  - Tell me more about that situation (when)
  - How do you think this situation affected you? (feelings + behavior)
    - Why?

*SPANISH:***Preguntas iniciales:**

- ¿Fue esta la primera vez que visitaste la Guajira?
- ¿Cuál crees que fue el propósito de que participaras en el programa de experiencias?
- Antes de iniciar el programa, ¿qué era lo que más te emocionaba? ¿Cuáles eran tus expectativas?



- Antes de iniciar el programa, ¿qué esperabas aprender?

### **Aprendizajes:**

- ¿Puedes contarme sobre algunos de los aprendizajes que te llevarás de este Programa de Experiencia?
- ¿Qué nuevas perspectivas o formas de ver las cosas sientes que has aprendido en estas lecciones, y en qué momentos aparecieron?
  - ¿Cómo han cambiado estas nuevas perspectivas tu forma de pensar de antes?
- ¿De qué maneras crees que estas nuevas ideas te pueden servir en el futuro?
  - ¿Crees que algo podría impedir que apliques estas nuevas perspectivas?

### **Momento memorable**

- ¿Puedes contarme algo que haya pasado durante el programa de experiencia que se te haya quedado grabado?
  - ¿Qué opinas sobre esta(s) situación(es)? / ¿Qué sentiste cuando ocurrió esto? (emociones)
    - ¿Por qué crees que te sentiste así? (pensamientos)
  - ¿Crees que esta lección o experiencia cambiará la forma en que piensas o actúas en el futuro? (transformación)
    - ¿Por qué sí/no?
    - ¿Crees que hay algo que haga difícil este cambio?

### **Nuevos puntos de vista**

- ¿Puedes contarme sobre algún momento en el programa de experiencia donde hayas compartido diferentes puntos de vista con otros participantes?
  - ( Cuéntame más sobre esa situación (cuándo).)
  - ¿Cómo te sentiste en esa situación? (emociones)
  - ¿Hubo alguna nueva perspectiva de esa situación que te llevarás para el futuro? (posible transformación)
    - ¿Cómo? (piensas usar esa nueva perspectiva en tu vida/en el futuro? //usarás esta nueva perspectiva en el futuro en la práctica/en tu vida?)

### **Sesiones de reflexión/ charlas con todo el grupo**

- ¿Qué opinas sobre las distintas sesiones de reflexión que tuvimos durante el programa de experiencia?
  - ¿Hubo algún momento específico en estas sesiones de reflexión que te haya impactado?

- ¿Cómo/Por qué?
- ¿Crees que el intercambio de conocimientos en el Programa de Experiencia puede mejorarse de alguna manera?
  
- ¿Hay algo más que te gustaría añadir?

**Cuestionar sus propios perspectivas – (Si hay tiempo)**

- ¿Hubo alguna conversación o actividad en el programa donde cuestionaste tus propias perspectivas?
  - Cuéntame más sobre esa situación (cuándo).
  - ¿Cómo crees que esa situación te afectó? (emociones y comportamiento)
    - ¿Por qué?

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