

DECOLONIAL TOURISM THROUGH THE EXCHANGE OF EXPERIENCES BETWEEN INDIGENOUS STUDENTS FROM CANADA AND LOCAL INDIGENOUS GUIDES IN COSTA RICA

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Abstract

This article proposes decolonial educational tourism as a way to challenge traditional narratives of conventional tourism, promoting experiences that value Indigenous knowledge, worldviews, and self-determination. It explores how the exchange of experiences between Indigenous students from Canada and Indigenous guides in Talamanca, Costa Rica, can strengthen an alternative approach to tourism. Using an ethnographic approach, we analyze the exchange experiences between Indigenous students and Indigenous tour guides. The findings suggest that such exchanges promote a more equitable form of tourism, grounded in mutual respect and shared learning, thereby challenging the extractivist logic of traditional tourism. Additionally, it promotes the cultural and economic sovereignty of host Indigenous communities, reinforcing their role as key actors in their own tourism development. This article concludes that exchange initiatives with a pedagogical perspective rooted in critical pedagogy and Indigenous education can serve as a model for decolonial tourism, in which Indigenous knowledge is centred and tourism experiences become spaces for intercultural learning, cultural resurgence, and cultural resistance.

Keywords: Decolonial pedagogy; Indigenous tourism; Bribri culture, Talamanca.

TURISMO DECOLONIAL ATRAVÉS DA TROCA DE EXPERIÊNCIAS ENTRE ESTUDANTES INDÍGENAS DO CANADÁ E GUIAS INDÍGENAS LOCAIS NA COSTA RICA

Resumo

Este artigo propõe o turismo educacional decolonial como uma forma de desafiar as narrativas tradicionais do turismo dominante, promovendo experiências que valorizam o conhecimento, as cosmovisões e a autodeterminação dos povos indígenas. Explora como a troca de experiências entre estudantes indígenas do Canadá e guias indígenas de Talamanca, na Costa Rica, pode fortalecer uma abordagem alternativa ao turismo. Utilizando uma abordagem etnográfica, são analisadas as experiências de intercâmbio entre estudantes indígenas e guias turísticos indígenas. Os resultados indicam que estes intercâmbios promovem uma forma de turismo mais justa, baseada no respeito mútuo e na aprendizagem partilhada, desafiando a lógica extractivista do turismo tradicional. Além disso, promovem a soberania cultural e económica das comunidades indígenas anfitriãs, reforçando o seu papel como actores-chave no seu próprio desenvolvimento turístico. O artigo conclui que as iniciativas de intercâmbio com uma perspectiva pedagógica, centradas na pedagogia crítica e na educação indígena, podem servir de modelo para o turismo decolonial, no qual o conhecimento indígena é colocado no centro e as experiências turísticas tornam-se espaços de aprendizagem intercultural, de ressurgimento cultural e de reforço da identidade.

Palavras-chave: Pedagogia decolonial; turismo indígena; cultura Bribri; Talamanca.

TURISMO DECOLONIAL A TRAVÉS DEL INTERCAMBIO DE EXPERIENCIAS ENTRE ESTUDIANTES INDÍGENAS DE CANADÁ Y GUÍAS LOCALES INDÍGENAS EN COSTA RICA

Resumen

Este artículo propone el turismo educativo decolonial como una forma de cuestionar las narrativas tradicionales del turismo convencional y promover experiencias que valoran el conocimiento, las cosmovisiones y la autodeterminación de los pueblos indígenas. Se explora cómo el intercambio de experiencias entre estudiantes indígenas de Canadá y guías indígenas de Talamanca, Costa Rica, puede fortalecer un enfoque alternativo del turismo. Mediante un enfoque etnográfico, se analizan las experiencias de intercambio entre estudiantes indígenas y guías turísticos indígenas. Los resultados indican que dichos intercambios fomentan una forma de turismo más justa, basada en el respeto mutuo y el aprendizaje compartido, y desafían la lógica extractivista del turismo tradicional. Además, promueve la soberanía cultural y económica de las comunidades indígenas anfitrionas, reforzando su papel como actores clave en su propio desarrollo turístico. El artículo concluye que las iniciativas de intercambio con una perspectiva pedagógica, centrada en la pedagogía crítica y en la educación indígena, pueden servir como modelo para un turismo decolonial, en el que el conocimiento indígena se sitúa en el centro.

Palabras clave: Pedagogía decolonial; turismo indígena; cultura Bribri, Talamanca.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Travel and tourism have historically functioned as a vehicle for transmitting colonial narratives (Pratt, 2010), often

reducing Indigenous communities to mere cultural objects for consumption, without recognizing their agency in managing their own heritage and development. In response to this dynamic, the concept of decolonial educational tourism



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emerges as an alternative that challenges and transforms the power structures inherent in traditional tourism practices. This approach aims to revalue the knowledge, worldviews, and self-determination of Indigenous peoples, proposing a more just and respectful relationship between visitors and host communities.

The Indigenous Local Guide Plan, developed by the Costa Rica Institute of Technology (TEC), represents an innovative and transformative initiative in sustainable tourism and community development. It was created in response to the specific needs of the Bribri Indigenous communities in the Talamanca region of Costa Rica.

The Canadian Indigenous Field School, which began in 2017 under the leadership of Prof. Dani Kwan-Lafond in collaboration with faculty and community partners at TEC, offers a global educational experience. This program enables students to travel between Canada and Costa Rica for intercultural exchange, land-based learning, and engagement with curricula focused on Indigenous rights, sovereignty, and community responses to colonialism.

This article examines how the exchange of experiences between Indigenous students from Canada and Indigenous guides in Talamanca, Costa Rica, offers an opportunity to develop an alternative tourism model. Using an ethnographic methodology, the interactions between these participants are analyzed to understand how such exchanges foster a form of tourism grounded in mutual respect, shared learning, and resistance to the dominant extractivist model.

Through this analysis, the article seeks to demonstrate how decolonial educational tourism initiatives can enhance the cultural and economic sovereignty of Indigenous communities, thereby solidifying their role as key agents in developing their own tourism sector.

In this context, the article argues that when tourism is approached from a decolonial pedagogical perspective, it can become a platform for cultural resurgence, knowledge exchange, and the empowerment of Indigenous communities.

2 THEORETICAL REVIEW

2.1 Decolonial, critical pedagogy and interculturality

The decolonial perspective is one of the most important manifestations of Latin American critical thought. This theoretical and political project seeks to promote an epistemological turn, characterized by a strong denunciation of the hegemonic structures of power and knowledge in the modern world system, deeply imbued with coloniality as a global power structure that gives continuity to colonialism (Quijano, 2020).

Decoloniality focuses on challenging knowledge hierarchies and Eurocentric ways of understanding the world, promoting other forms of existence and knowledge.

As antecedents of decolonial thought, we can mention the theory of dependency (Katz, 2016) and critical pedagogy (Freire, 1968). Critical pedagogy emerges as a response to the region's historical conditions of oppression and inequality, integrating emancipatory educational traditions from the 19th century to the present. Its development is grounded in three

key conceptual pillars: otherness, emancipation, and liberation, all of which aim to transform social structures through education (Rojas Hurtátiz & Gualteros, 2018). For critical pedagogy, learning must be deeply connected to the student's reality and social context. Critical pedagogy seeks to transform traditional education by promoting critical thinking and social awareness among students.

In the same vein, critical interculturality serves as a pedagogical tool that challenges racialization, subalternization, and inferiorization, as well as their underlying power structures. Moreover, it makes visible diverse ways of being, living, and knowing, fostering the development of understandings and conditions that not only facilitate dialogue among differences within a framework of legitimacy, dignity, equality, equity, and respect but also encourage the creation of alternative ways of thinking, being, existing, learning, teaching, dreaming, and living (Walsh, 2010; 2018).

On the other hand, decolonial critical theory addresses these asymmetries from a perspective that includes not only class, but also race, gender, the coloniality of power and knowledge (Lugones, 2008; Quijano, 2020; Lander, 2000). Both the decolonial perspective and critical pedagogy seek to challenge and promote a horizontal dialogue between different forms of knowledge, aiming to transform educational structures to include and value the knowledge of subalternized peoples.

2.2 Pedagogy Decolonial Tourism

Decolonial pedagogical tourism is grounded in the theoretical frameworks of coloniality and decoloniality (Arias-Hidalgo, 2023) and the transformative power of the pedagogy of praxis (Freire, 1968). In this sense, decolonial tourism pedagogy strongly critiques tourism practices that reproduce coloniality.

In this context, tourism initiatives developed by Indigenous communities that promote decolonial practices emerge as alternatives, legitimizing the autonomy of Indigenous peoples and empowering organizational structures and knowledge systems that have been historically marginalized by dominant cultures. While this theoretical framework addresses central concepts, it simultaneously exposes the need to further theorize decolonial pedagogical tourism.

We can define decolonial pedagogical tourism as the link between the long tradition of critical decolonial pedagogy and alternative tourism; it is a practical way to apply decolonial pedagogy in situ. In this model of alternative tourism, local communities take control of their territories and offer tourism experiences that are designed in accordance with their own cultural values. These interactions can promote critical perspectives among tourists, professors and students. Decolonial tourism shows the effects of asymmetric power relations in South-North, preventing the reproduction of modern colonial structures through educational and conventional experience bases in decolonial tourism from using the Indigenous perspective of *buen vivir* (Arias-Hidalgo, 2023)

2.2 Land education (Canada)

Land Education is a pedagogical approach that “puts Indigenous epistemological and ontological accounts of land at the center” (Tuck, McKenzie, & McCoy, 2014), and is a form of knowledge creation and knowledge sharing in itself that is integral to Indigenous life, and that has increasingly been adopted as an approach to Indigenized teaching and learning in post-secondary institutions. Coloniality has sought to disconnect Indigenous peoples and communities from their land; Land Education seeks to restore Indigenous connections to land and place, recognizing that all aspects of the land – including people, animals, and plants – are related, interdependent, and connected (McDonald, 2023). Land Education is also directed by Indigenous knowledge keepers and informed by Indigenous worldviews (for example, the Bribri ‘cosmovision’).

The Indigenous guides program referred to here is a form of Land Education, insofar as it seeks to strengthen BriBri connections with land, knowledge, and prioritizes self-determination as a key aspect of the program. Related to this, the curricula and pedagogy for non-Indigenous Canadian University students who learn with Indigenous guides is also Land Education, with an emphasis on the importance of travelling to specific lands to engage with local knowledge in place.

2.3 Linkage Between Teaching-Learning and Extension Outreach (Costa Rica)

University extension or outreach constitutes a fundamental function of Latin American higher education, aimed at fostering the comprehensive development of professionals grounded in national realities, history, and cultural knowledge. Therefore, integrating university extension activities into teaching practices can enable and strengthen students’ experiential engagement with society’s realities and challenges.

The scope of extension goes beyond cultural development to encompass the university community. It is therefore crucial to recognize the educational potential of extension, ensuring an effective articulation of teaching and research that enhances understanding and supports the resolution of social problems (Serna, 2007).

The University Extension at TEC focuses on community development and the strengthening of local capacities, particularly in peasant and Indigenous communities. Notably, the Talamanca region has been a key area for implementing various extension projects over the past 15 years, covering themes such as gender, sustainable agriculture, environmental management, and business. These projects promote the active and proactive participation of local stakeholders, as well as professors and students, in seeking solutions to the issues faced by their communities. This work is carried out from a critical perspective that values and enhances local knowledge. In this regard, it is important to underscore that the Indigenous local guides program emerged from a student graduation project developed with strong participation from the Bribri Indigenous community (Arias & Solano, 2009)

Figure 1. Indigenous tours guides.



Source: own elaboration.

3 METHODOLOGY

For the development of this research, an ethnographic approach was adopted (Guber, 2011). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with local tour guides and TEC graduates, who served as key informants. Many of them are involved in various tourism initiatives in Talamanca, providing valuable perspectives for the study. Additionally, it is essential to note that the authors have over 10 years (2015-2025) of experience working in the region alongside local guides, which provides valuable insight into the context and its dynamics.

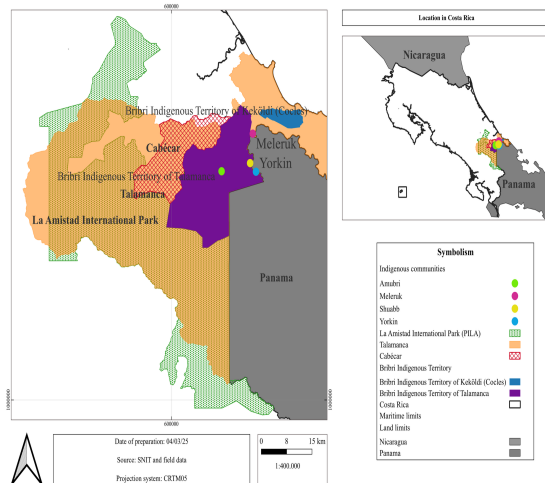
A qualitative approach was adopted, one that centers the voices of Indigenous actors as producers of knowledge and historical subjects. The specific objective is to identify local guides’ discourses that reflect decolonizing narratives, using a decolonial perspective as the analytical framework. This research is based on experiential data gathered over the past ten years through seven visits to Talamanca, during which Indigenous communities and Canadian students engaged in shared learning experiences through educational and tourism-based encounters.

To strengthen certain aspects of the analysis, notes (from communities, elders, and individuals involved in tourism activities), photographs, and recordings were also used. This information was primarily collected during the researchers’ participation in other research and outreach projects. In addition to formal research activities, the Canadian post-secondary field school served as a significant source of documentation and reflection for this study. Although the field school itself is not a research project, faculty and participants systematically collected field notes, student reflections, blogs, photographs, and videos throughout each trip. These materials provide a rich record of the learning processes, intercultural exchanges, and lived experiences of both students and community members. Faculty field notes and student reflections capture personal and collective insights, while blogs and multimedia artifacts document key moments and themes that arose during the immersion.

This documentation provides a crucial foundation for the information and reflective analysis presented in this article, offering nuanced perspectives on the dynamics of

decolonial educational tourism and the transformative potential of such exchanges.

Figure 2. Location map.



Source: own elaboration.

4 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Indigenous Local Guide Program

The Indigenous Local Guide Plan, developed by the Costa Rica Institute of Technology (TEC), is an innovative and transformative initiative in sustainable tourism and community development. This program, which originated in 2009, emerged as a response to the specific needs of the Bribri indigenous communities in the Talamanca region of Costa Rica.

The plan is distinguished by its comprehensive approach, combining cultural preservation, sustainable economic development, and specialized professional training. Its primary objective is to train members of Indigenous communities as highly qualified tour guides, capable of sharing their rich cultural and natural heritage with visitors from around the world.

Throughout its development, the program has evolved, adapting to local realities and challenges. It has benefited from the collaboration of various academic and governmental entities, including the active participation of TEC's Sustainable Tourism Management and Sustainable Rural Tourism Management programs, as well as support from the Costa Rican Tourism Institute (ICT).

This plan has not only provided technical training in tourism but has also strengthened capacities in leadership, entrepreneurship, and community management. As a result, it has empowered Indigenous communities, enabling them to take charge of their own tourism development in ways that respect and promote their culture and traditions.

The success of the Indigenous Local Guide Plan is reflected in tangible achievements, including the creation of the Association of Bribri Indigenous Tourist Guides of Talamanca (AGITUBRIT) and the establishment of the first

certified Indigenous rural tourism agency in Costa Rica. These accomplishments demonstrate the transformative potential of well-designed educational initiatives executed in collaboration with local communities.

In this article, the Indigenous Local Guide program serves as an exemplary model of how inclusive education can contribute to sustainable development, cultural preservation, and community engagement, laying the groundwork for a more equitable and sustainable future in Costa Rica's indigenous regions.

4.1.1 Key Pedagogical Elements in the Indigenous Local Guides Program

The Indigenous Local Tourist Guides Program was an educational training project outreach incorporating various pedagogical elements adapted to the worldview and needs of the Bribri Indigenous communities (Arias, 2019). From an educational perspective, this program stands out for its participatory action research approach (IAP; Fals, 1999) and its critical pedagogical focus, including the involvement of the Indigenous community in the construction and implementation of the program and allowing participants to take greater ownership of knowledge.

One of the most significant pedagogical aspects is the integration of traditional knowledge with academic and technical expertise. In this regard, the program facilitates situated learning within the participants' cultural and environmental context. This enables future tour guides not only to develop skills in biodiversity interpretation and group management but also to strengthen their cultural identity by preserving and disseminating their historical heritage and ancestral worldview.

The involvement of traditional authorities, such as the 'Awapa' (traditional healers) and the 'Kekepa' (community elders with vast wisdom) in the design and implementation of the courses is another key element of the pedagogical model. This approach fosters dialogical and horizontal learning, where knowledge is transmitted not only by academic experts but also by community members who play a fundamental role in cultural continuity and in reflecting upon the complex problems confronting the Bribri territory.

Additionally, the use of participatory methodologies, such as experiential learning and fieldwork, allows participants to develop practical skills in real-life settings. The training included visits to protected natural areas, communities, interpretive tours, and guided tourism simulations, enhancing meaningful learning directly linked to their future professional roles.

The program also stands out for its inclusive and flexible approach, which adapts to participants' living conditions. The modular course structure, combined with in-person and virtual modalities, facilitated the participation of both young people and adults with family and work responsibilities, promoting accessible and equitable education.

For example, incorporating *siwā*¹ into a training program for Indigenous local guides involves embracing a

¹ The word *siwā* is polysemic; it means wind, story, soul, spirit, and knowledge. When the Bribri people speak of their *siwā*, they refer to their

worldview, their ancestral knowledge, their philosophy, their wisdom, and their science. In this way, all the stories about the origin of the universe,

decolonial pedagogy that recognizes and affirms ancestral knowledge as a fundamental pillar of understanding. Rather than imposing an external or hegemonic worldview, this pedagogy acknowledges the Bribri cosmivision as a legitimate and profound way of interpreting the world.

Thus, *siwā*, with its philosophical, ethical, and spiritual richness, not only enriches the program's content but also shapes how teaching and learning occur – prioritizing orality, song, communal experience, respect for elders (*kéképa*) and spiritual leaders (*awapa*), and a sacred connection with nature. This decolonial perspective promotes a training process grounded in the territory, collective memory, and reciprocity with all beings in the environment. It contributes not only to the professionalization of the guides but also to strengthening their cultural identity and exercising their autonomy.

In practice, this project involved decolonizing the curriculum in tour guide training. In Costa Rica, there are no specialized programs in Indigenous tourism, which made it very challenging to convince the Tourism Accreditation Commission and the Costa Rican Tourism Institute (ICT) of the need to include Indigenous knowledge in tourism training programs. This reflects an epistemic resistance to broader efforts to decolonize knowledge.

The Indigenous Local Tourist Guides Program serves as an exemplary case of decolonial and contextualized education, in which participatory pedagogy and respect for traditional knowledge play central roles. This educational model not only contributes to the professionalization of Indigenous tour guides but also strengthens cultural identity and community autonomy.

4.1.2 *Decolonial elements in the discourses of tour guides and tourism projects*

During the visits to communities in Talamanca, Canadian students have the opportunity to learn about Indigenous experiences, many of which are centered on cultural emancipation and decolonial processes. Over the past decade, some of the most significant experiences for these students have highlighted resilience, knowledge of nature, and cultural revitalization efforts by Indigenous communities.

The stories and teachings from Indigenous guides and the tourism projects they promote from within their communities can incorporate deeply decolonial elements by placing territory, language, defense of nature and ancestral knowledge at the center of the experience. These discourses and practices challenge the dominant narrative of conventional tourism.

The revitalization of the Bribri language is a fundamental part of the message conveyed to visitors in the community of Yorkin. The guides' stories about local histories highlight issues of language loss and how, through collective efforts in recent decades, they have promoted the recovery of the Bribri language as a means of reclaiming their identity. This initiative goes beyond serving as a mere tourist attraction; tourism provides an additional reason to maintain

and promote cultural and language proficiency, and is a strategy to strengthen their culture and ensure that future generations continue to use their ancestral language.

Indeed, Yorkin's experience with the Stibrawpa project (a women-led local tourism initiative) demonstrates that the process of language loss can be reversed, as 90% of community members are Bribri speakers today. In this context, tourism has functioned as a tool for the decolonization of knowledge, challenging the dominance of an imposed language (Spanish).

The revitalization of the Bribri language promoted by Stibrawpa can be interpreted as a form of epistemological resistance: a manifestation of local power in response to the epistemicide fostered by capitalism and neocolonialism, according to the framework of the coloniality of knowledge (Lander, 2000) and decolonial theory.

Another aspect emphasized by both male and female Indigenous guides is the importance of the matrilineal structure in Bribri and Cabécar cultures. The main characteristics of this system, which still persist today, include the inheritance of clan membership through the maternal line and the practice of reciprocal labour among members. A notable example is the project led by the women of Stibrawpa in Yorkin. The association's guides underscore for visitors the significance of clan traditions and the essential contribution of Indigenous women to the decolonization of unequal gender dynamics. In fact, the Stibrawpa project goes beyond the economic empowerment of Indigenous women; it embodies a profound process of female empowerment in which men play a secondary, supporting role (Arias-Hidalgo and Blangy, 2023).

The Bribri farming systems could be considered as an expression of the diversity found in the tropical forest. A clear example of the Land Education approach is experienced by students during a visit to Farm *lyök Kané*, guided by BriBri guide Ballarino Oniel, in the community of Shuabb, located on the border between Costa Rica and Panama. This visit exemplifies decolonial pedagogy in practice. Throughout the tour, the Indigenous guide focuses his discourse not only on the economic and productive value of the Indigenous polyculture system in terms of resource generation, but also on its significance as a way of life that is consistent with the community's mode of existence. This way of life is closely tied to the forest and agriculture, as the polyculture system provides medicinal plants, a wide variety of edible crops, and fruit trees, which in turn feed wild animals that some people hunt on their own farms for family consumption.

In this context, it is essential to recognize the diversity of uses of polyculture as a life strategy for Indigenous families. Overlooking this aspect amounts to a direct attack on the rational management of the ecosystem from the Indigenous worldview. For a large part of the Bribri population, the forest and polyculture system represent much more than the mere acquisition of euros, dollars, or colones; they constitute the fundamental means of living within a broad life strategy based on the diversity of options provided by the environment, without relying on the capitalist market

the creation of the earth, and the formation of the clans are part of the *siwā*.

economy. This way of life represents a form of resistance to the commodification of both food and medicine.

As the Indigenous guide points out, "The farm is the work of the land (*iyök kané*); for us, the Bribri, it is equivalent to what you call the *sikua*, your supermarket and pharmacy" (Ballarino Oniel, personal communication, May 2018). The issue associated with the loss of traditional Indigenous agriculture for family consumption lies in the incompatibility of this system with the model of extensive agricultural exploitation, which is a manifestation of the legacy of colonialism and "agricultural coloniality." This model promotes monoculture and exacerbates populations' vulnerability by systematically weakening their productive autonomy, which is essential to guaranteeing a certain degree of food sovereignty.

The majority of the guides promote the philosophy of *Buen Vivir*², or *Bua'ë sēneā* (literal translation of "good living" in the Bribri language), within the complex cultural code of sharing and knowledge (*sivā*) in Bribri tradition, which draws upon the ancestral values rooted in their worldview (*se shua te*), such as reciprocity, solidarity, and respect for nature.

Bua'ë sēneā challenges the notions of poverty and developmentalism from a non-Indigenous (*sikua*) perspective. Beyond the evident needs for economic resources and public services in the Indigenous territories of Talamanca, it is also important to recognize that understanding poverty requires moving away from the Western conceptualization that defines it primarily as a lack of economic resources.

Thus, it is necessary to ask: what does it mean to be poor for a Bribri individual? From the perspective of local Bribri guides, poverty is most often associated with food insecurity (access to land and subsistence farming), access to forest resources (such as wood and other food sources), and the ability to live peacefully and without stress within a healthy, ecologically balanced ecosystem. "*In the words of Indigenous guide Joel Buitrago from the Meleruk community: we should not kill each other over nothing, but care for one another in everything, including nature itself.*" (personal communication, June 2021).

4.2 The Canadian University Field School

The Canadian Field School is an international educational program in which students from the University of Toronto Scarborough participate for upper-year Sociology course credit. The course focuses on Indigenous international rights (such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, or UNDRIP), nationhood, sovereignty, and land in both Canada and Costa Rica. Students' grades are determined by course assignments, travel, and community engagement. The course is taught by a non-Indigenous lead faculty member (who is also a co-author of this article), an Indigenous teaching assistant, and guest faculty.

From 2017 to 2020, the course was delivered under a similar educational model at a Canadian college. Long-term

partnerships among the lead faculty, Dani Kwan-Lafond; TEC faculty; students; and the student program coordinator, Diana Segura Sojo, have sustained the project through institutional changes and are among the strengths of this intercultural exchange. The program also includes Bribri guides, who are another focus of this paper. Typically, 11 to 13 Canadian students participate in the field school every two years, and to date, 65 Canadian students have taken part in the project across six trips.

Students in the Field School come from diverse Canadian backgrounds. Most are first- or second-generation Canadian students whose families recently migrated to Toronto and reside in the Greater Toronto Area. A minority of students have been Indigenous to Canada, with 2-3 students per group identifying as First Nation, Inuit or Métis (FNIM). This is a reflection of larger patterns of educational access for FNIM students, who are underrepresented in post-secondary education in Canada overall (Colleges and Institutes Canada, 2024; Statistics Canada, 2023a; Statistics Canada 2023b). Also included in each group are religious minority students (Muslim or Jewish) and international students who are studying in Canada. The majority of each group of Canadian students have been women; this is consistent with the research showing that more women than men are enrolled as students in humanities and social science programs across Canada (Statistics Canada, 2023c).

Participation in the Field School requires an application, completion of prerequisites, and in-person, on-campus learning prior to travel. The prerequisites assess students' prior learning on Indigenous topics, including their previous engagement with, or exposure to, Indigenous-led learning in communities.

The teaching team is committed to ensuring cultural safety for Indigenous partners, and during the student selection process, there is an emphasis on students' knowledge of cultural protocols, interpersonal skills, and ability to demonstrate culturally appropriate behaviours and respect. This course is not intended as an introduction to learning with and from Indigenous peoples; rather, it is designed to build on previously acquired knowledge and experience.

For the 2022 and 2024 Field School courses, all UTSC students had previously participated in classes with Prof. Kwan-Lafond that included land-based and experiential learning. Examples include a three-day retreat at an outdoor education centre with an Indigenous Elder; workshops and activities in an on-campus Indigenous garden led by an Indigenous farmer; and/or sharing circles or talks by Residential School survivors.

The Field School travels to Costa Rica for 14 to 16 days every two years, partnering with Indigenous Costa Rican students, university faculty, and community organizations, including the BriBri Indigenous Tour Guides program. The group travels by bus, stays in shared accommodations, and participates in both formal education (such as lectures and workshops held in traditional classrooms) and informal

² *Buen Vivir* is a way of life grounded in Indigenous philosophy. It differs markedly from Western notions of the "good life" or "living well," which typically equate well-being and quality of life with the accumulation of material

goods. In this sense, the concept of *Buen Vivir* departs from the orthodox paradigm of economic development and the ideal of unlimited growth (Acosta, 2013).

education (including structured and unstructured conversations, land-based learning, and experiential learning in Indigenous communities). After returning to Canada, Canadian students are required to submit coursework, which may include written reflections, essays, and other assignments.

4.2.1 Pedagogical Elements of the Field School

The Field School curriculum is informed by critical pedagogy and land-centred experiential learning, under the broad umbrella of Indigenous education. The teaching team shares the moral and political impetus that education should contribute to positive social and ecological change, and a commitment to reciprocity, relationality, and reflexivity are core values informing our educational praxis.

The Field School employs the pedagogical concept and practice of creating a community of learners (Dei, 2014) during the travel portion of the course, in which Canadian students and faculty join Costa Rican participants to form a single group that travels together, stays in shared accommodations, and participates in activities together.

This approach facilitates both formal and informal learning, and reflects an ethical and pedagogical commitment to learning as a shared, collective process. Informal learning, in this context, is intentional but less highly structured than institutional learning (Marsick & Watkins, 2001).

Many hours of the trip are spent on a bus together, and all meals are shared by the group. The leadership team intentionally sits among students and community members to foster a culture of inclusivity, which is further supported by structured activities, such as sharing circles early in the trip. Unplanned conversations at meals and during travel often become rich opportunities for exchange, where participants share reflections, perspectives, and related knowledge about their experiences. Students record these reflections in journals and notes, ensuring that informal learning is recognized and built upon in later assignments.

The international and intra-national Field School engages in educational practices that democratize learning and prioritize ethical relationalities, accountabilities, and responsibilities among members of the community of learners. Curricula are delivered in Costa Rica through collaboration with community-based partners, including the Indigenous Tour Guides Association, which leads several days of learning in Bribri Talamanca.

The inclusion of Bribri students in the group extends the model of a community of learners and often fosters multigenerational, kinship-based learning environments. Other Indigenous students—both Costa Rican and Canadian—benefit from seeing Indigenous tour guides and facilitators in leadership positions, strengthening intercultural learning and affirming Indigenous authority in pedagogical spaces. The close relational ties among participants enhance land-based and experiential learning throughout the trip.

While Canadian students often arrive without pre-existing relationships, many faculty, community partners, and Indigenous Costa Rican students have connections that go back to the project's inception in 2017. These enduring relationships contribute to rapid group cohesion and

sustained trust. Anecdotally, the Field School has experienced little to no major conflict or breakdowns in group dynamics, a testament to the careful pedagogical preparation that occurs year-round in advance of each trip.

Indigenous education principles are central to the Field School's design and purpose. The program was co-planned to address shortcomings of traditional global education models by prioritizing reciprocity, self-determination, and equitable benefits for participants from the Global South. The Field School travels to Costa Rica every two years for 14 to 16 days, partnering with Indigenous Costa Rican students, faculty, and community organizations. The pedagogical and curricular values of reciprocity, relationality, and reflexivity are woven through all aspects of the program and are revisited throughout this section.

The educational practice of creating a community of learners centers on fostering collaborative, inclusive, and dialogic spaces where knowledge is co-produced and learning is understood as a shared, collective endeavor. Dei (2014) articulates this concept through an Indigenist, anti-colonial lens, emphasizing that classrooms should move away from competitive individualism and instead nurture mutual trust, interdependence, and respect among all participants. In such communities, every learner is valued, and knowledge is treated as a communal resource rather than the property of a select few. This approach draws on Indigenous democratic principles, where education is deeply tied to community life, social responsibility, and the holistic development of learners—engaging body, mind, and spirit in critical dialogue about themselves and their world.

Other scholars echo these ideas. Lenning et al. (1999) define a learning community as a purposeful group committed to mutual learning and growth, characterized by ongoing dialogue, cooperation, and shared goals. Similarly, frameworks for community-based learning highlight the importance of creating safe, inclusive environments that build on students' strengths and foster agency, collaboration, and resilience—principles often aligned with Indigenous worldviews and restorative practices. Together, these perspectives underscore that a community of learners is not merely a pedagogical strategy, but a transformative orientation toward education that prioritizes equity, collective well-being, and the co-construction of knowledge (Smith et al., 2004).

In practice, the community of learners model has facilitated meaningful intercultural learning between Canadian students and Bribri guides. Time spent together in dialogue, rather than in one-way instruction, allows for continuous inquiry and shared agency over what is taught and learned. Informal learning takes shape through open-ended conversation, social interaction, and reflective engagement. These moments—often occurring during bus rides, meals, or leisure periods—enable participants to connect ideas to lived experience, develop deeper self-awareness, and practice critical thinking in authentic, relational contexts (Columbia Center for Teaching and Learning, 2021).

During the Field School's time in Bribri communities, participants are encouraged to get to know one another by rotating seats at meals, engaging in long walks, and participating in shared activities with Bribri guides and family

members. Community members frequently join in, creating a genuine atmosphere of inclusion that is supported by structured activities such as sharing circles. The informal exchanges that emerge during these moments are especially valuable: participants share insights, compare experiences, and reflect on both differences and commonalities, contributing to the program's emphasis on intercultural and relational learning.

One example from 2019 illustrates the power of this approach. In the village of Amubri, students and community members gathered one evening to play cards and talk about fishing and food. A Canadian student brought a travel-sized fishing rod and lures designed for lake fishing in Ontario. What began as an informal conversation about fishing techniques and local practices evolved into a vibrant exchange on access to food, Indigenous fishing rights, and cultural knowledge-sharing.

Eventually, two Bribri guides and the student engaged in a friendly fishing competition to compare Bribri methods with Canadian gear. The Bribri guides caught three fish, while the Canadian student caught none—but later described the experience as one of the most memorable and meaningful of the trip. The next day, the fish were shared in a group meal, and the student gifted his fishing gear to the Bribri guide as a gesture of gratitude. This story exemplifies how unstructured, relational learning moments can embody reciprocity and mutual respect while deepening intercultural understanding.

Indigenous education principles and Land Education are integral to the Field School's philosophy and practice. Land Education is a pedagogical approach and a form of knowledge creation and sharing, rooted in Indigenous life and increasingly adopted in post-secondary settings seeking to Indigenize teaching and learning. Coloniality has sought to sever Indigenous peoples from land and place, while Land Education seeks to restore and sustain those relationships. It recognizes that all that is of the land—people, animals, plants, and elements — are interrelated and interdependent (McDonald, 2023).

Guided by Indigenous knowledge keepers and informed by Indigenous worldviews, such as the Bribri cosmivision, Land Education situates learning as an act of relational renewal. The Indigenous guides program, for example, embodies Land Education by strengthening Bribri connections to land and knowledge while prioritizing self-determination.

Reciprocity remains a guiding value for the Field School leadership team. Acknowledging persistent North–South inequities in resources and institutional power, the program intentionally draws on critical pedagogy to name and analyze these disparities as part of the learning process. Participants are encouraged to identify inequities as they arise, engage in open dialogue about their implications, and co-develop ways to minimize asymmetrical impacts. Project leaders work continuously to ensure that reciprocity is not treated as an abstract principle but enacted through everyday practices—such as compensating local partners fairly, prioritizing community-led learning, and co-authoring educational materials where possible.

Through these pedagogical choices, the Field School contributes to a broader decolonial reimagining of global education. It emphasizes ethical collaboration, shared

accountability, and the redistribution of learning benefits toward participants from the Global South. The initiative demonstrates that experiential, intercultural education can be a site of both critical reflection and transformation, where all members—students, faculty, and community partners—learn with and from one another.

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Indigenous guides serve as key intercultural mediators, actively engaging in decolonial pedagogical tourism practices. Their discourse reveals a range of decolonial actions, including fostering respectful and harmonious relationships with nature through polycultural farming, challenging conventional gender roles, and revitalizing Indigenous languages. Collectively, these practices embody their vision of *Buen Vivir*. In our pluriverse (Escobar, 2008), these alternatives can help construct a decolonial pedagogy of tourism.

The Canadian Post-Secondary Field School demonstrates how international, land-based, and intercultural education can foster deep, reciprocal learning between Canadian and Indigenous communities in Costa Rica. By employing a “community of learners” model, the program encourages students and faculty to learn collaboratively with Indigenous partners, thereby breaking down traditional hierarchies and fostering mutual respect and shared knowledge. Memorable moments, like the fishing exchange between Canadian students and Bribri guides, highlight the value of intercultural dialogue and non-hierarchical learning.

Overall, the Field School's focus on reciprocity, community, and Indigenous-led land education offers a model for ethical, transformative post-secondary education that offers potential benefits both students and Indigenous partners.

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CRedit author statement

Term	Definition	Author 1	A2
Conceptualization	Ideas; formulation or evolution of overarching research goals and aims	x	
Methodology	Development or design of methodology; creation of models	x	x
Software	Programming, software development; designing computer programs; implementation of the computer code and supporting algorithms; testing of existing code components		
Validation	Verification, whether as a part of the activity or separate, of the overall replication/ reproducibility of results/experiments and other research outputs	x	
Formal analysis	Application of statistical, mathematical, computational, or other formal techniques to analyze or synthesize study data	x	x
Investigation	Conducting a research and investigation process, specifically performing the experiments, or data/evidence collection	x	x
Resources	Provision of study materials, reagents, materials, patients, laboratory samples, animals, instrumentation, computing resources, or other analysis tools	x	x
Data Curation	Management activities to annotate (produce metadata), scrub data and maintain research data (including software code, where it is necessary for interpreting the data itself) for initial use and later reuse	x	x
Writing - Original Draft	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work, specifically writing the initial draft (including substantive translation)	x	
Writing - Review & Editing	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work by those from the original research group, specifically critical review, commentary or revision – including pre-or post-publication stages	x	x
Visualization	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work, specifically visualization/ data presentation	x	x

Term	Definition	Author 1	A2
Supervision	Oversight and leadership responsibility for the research activity planning and execution, including mentorship external to the core team	x	
Project administration	Management and coordination responsibility for the research activity planning and execution	x	x
Funding acquisition	Acquisition of the financial support for the project leading to this publication	x	x

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