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Proximatising community-based learning programme in Japan: Rethinking local–university collaboration for transformative tourism education

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Abstract:

The number of tourism programmes in Japan has increased over the last two decades. With this development, community-based learning (CBL) has become particularly popular in rural regions, where tourism is often used as a tool for revitalisation. In the Japanese context, the role of CBL is frequently ‘measured’ by how students contribute to rural areas or in terms of the skills they gain as a result of their learning. While the short-term outcomes of CBL in rural communities and amongst students have been studied, limited research exists on how students themselves transform through these forms of education. As such, this study examines two bodies of literature, on relational pedagogy and proximity tourism, to provide a nuanced understanding of the role of CBL in tourism education. By conceptualising CBL as proximity tourism, this study theoretically discusses how CBL contributes to the mutual transformation of students and local communities.

Introduction

Given the trends of an ageing population, increasing outmigration, and decreasing birth rates in Japanese rural regions, the Japanese government and academics alike have emphasised the roles of *toshi-no-son-koryus* (urban–rural interactions) and *kankei-jinko* (directly translated as a ‘relational population’, referring to the diverse mobility of people

situated between tourists and settler) in enhancing the mobility of individuals who connect with these marginalised places (e.g., Nakanishi et al., 2024; Teraoka, 2020). By increasing this form of mobility, the Japanese government aims to contribute to the revitalisation of these regions by not only encouraging urbanites to migrate to rural Japan (Yamagishi & Doering, 2025) but also motivating university students to visit these marginal areas and interact with various stakeholders (Fujii & Fujita, 2015; Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology-Japan [MEXT], 2021). Given the importance of tourism as a tool for revitalising rural regions, tourism university students and tourism education are expected to contribute to solving various issues in rural Japan. Community-based learning (CBL) programmes have become a common teaching practice in tourism education in Japanese universities, enabling students to be involved in and collaborate with rural communities to explore ways to revitalise these areas (Ohnishi, 2016; Uenoyama & Nagase, 2020). The function of CBL in Japan is commonly assessed by evaluating the extent to which students contribute to the revitalisation of rural areas or the competencies and insights they acquire from their learning experiences. Although the effects of CBL programmes have been investigated, research that theoretically examines how students undergo transformation through CBL is scarce. As such, the primary aim of this study is to present a fresh and nuanced understanding of CBL by examining how tourism students transform through such programmes. In addition to this primary purpose, this study also addresses the creation of mutual relationships between hosts and guests through CBL by examining the interactions between universities and local communities.

To achieve this aim, I first provide an overview of the development of tourism in higher education and its history in Japan. Secondly, I briefly introduce the key themes found in relational pedagogy literature. Based on this theoretical understanding, I synthesise ideas from relational pedagogy into tourism literature and provide an alternative understanding of local–university collaboration and its role as transformative education. Following this, I introduce the idea of proximity tourism to examine how CBL programmes contribute to the transformation of students and creation of a mutual relationship between universities and local communities. By situating CBL as proximity tourism, this study opens the possibility of CBL inspiring students to engage in tourism in more ethical and caring ways

Background

Study of Tourism in Higher Education

Tourism higher education developed in response to the need for job-ready graduates who can work in the tourism industry, which suffered from labour shortages in the 1980s and 1990s (Sharpley, 2011). Given this context, tourism programmes tend to be highly influenced by the industry; they focus on the vocational aspect of education (Caton, 2014). However, after the negative impacts of the tourism industry became more explicit, the role of tourism education shifted from simply producing job-ready graduates to creating more reflective professionals (Tribe 2002). Tribe (2002) introduced the concept of a philosophical practitioner, arguing for the importance of a more balanced curriculum that contains both the vocational and liberal aspects of tourism education. Although two decades have passed since this concept was introduced, theoretical discussions are ongoing (e.g., Dredge et al., 2012; Hays & Tucker, 2022). Dredge et al. (2012) examined this concept to develop a curriculum framework that assists in identifying various stakeholders and understanding how each individual sees the role of tourism education. Their framework enables the analysis of the different motivations and expectations of tourism education from the industry, universities, and government. In doing so, they demonstrate how the aspects of vocational and liberal education can coexist rather than one dominating the other.

However, as Edelman et al. (2023) and Hayes and Tucker (2022) note, tourism education is still largely guided by the neo-liberal ideology of the field, which focuses on producing competitive human resources. Hayes and Tucker (2022) argue that the concept of a philosophical practitioner is limited because the educational worldview is often centred on individualism, human-centric, and egoistic learner characteristics, with the primary focus potentially remaining on creating a reflective ‘workforce’ (Tribe, 2002). According to Hayes and Tucker (2022), these workforces can reflect on their individual actions without challenging or disrupting convention, thereby reproducing capitalist and neo-liberal conditions in tourism. By advocating a relational worldview, their work expands the role of tourism higher education, demonstrating how such programmes contribute to the transformation of students’ views on tourism and change their ways of knowing about and relating to the tourism world-making process. These outcomes are not easily and equally measured; this transformation can impact their lives (Edelman et al., 2023; Hayes & Tucker, 2022). While current tourism education research has advocated for a more inclusive and humanistic approach, the impact of neo-liberalism and new managerialism still largely dominates the nature of contemporary tourism education, which relies on measurable outcomes and qualifications (Ayikoru, 2014). These tensions between vocation and the liberal, philosophical (Tribe, 2002), or humanistic (Caton, 2012) aspects have arisen in not only Western universities but also Japan. By highlighting

the historical development of tourism education in Japan, the next section demonstrates how Japan has followed a similar trend as in the West, but in a slightly different context.

Development of Tourism Higher Education in Japan

Kudo's (2015) analysis of tourism higher education in Japan draws on historical developments from the 1960s to the beginning of the 2010s. The development of tourism higher education in Japan began in the 1960s, when the nation hosted the Tokyo Olympic Games in 1965 (Kudo, 2015). Similar to in other countries, tourism programmes were initially developed to respond to the demands of the industry and society. Two Japanese private higher education institutions, Toyo Female Junior College and Rikkyo University, introduced a hotel management course, producing tourism and hospitality professionals to accommodate inbound tourists. In the late 1990s, the internationalisation of higher education became a trend. Following this, tourism courses have often been integrated into international programmes, such as the International Tourism Management Programme established in Nara Prefectural University of Commerce (now called Nara Prefectural University) in 1996 and the Department of International Communication at Hannan University, which introduced the International Tourism Programme in 1997. In the 2000s, the focus of Japanese higher education shifted from internationalisation to localisation, which Kudo labelled the era of *chiiki* ('local' or 'regional' in Japanese). Regional national universities, including Wakayama, Yamaguchi, and Ryukyu, established tourism programmes. Following this, tourism began to be recognised as a subject of study, and research and tourism-related post-graduate programmes have been introduced not only at the abovementioned regional universities but also in larger higher education institutions such as Hokkaido University and Osaka Metropolitan University (Kudo, 2015).

A distinctive feature of Japanese tourism is higher education, which may be an element of *chiiki*. As Kudo noted, the paradigm of *chiiki saisei* (rural revitalisation) emerged in the mid-2000s, influenced largely by the national policy of higher education. The central government in Japan updated the Basic Act on Education in 2006, assigning Japanese universities a new role of contributing to society, in addition to their traditional roles of teaching and research (Nakatsuka & Odagiri, 2016; Utsunomiya, 2016). Given the trends of an ageing population, increasing outmigration, and decreasing birth rates in Japanese rural regions, rural communities have become more welcoming towards outsiders who can contribute to the revitalisation of these regions. Universities – particularly those located in rural regions – are expected to take on this new role and use their intellectual property to revitalise rural regions (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications

[MIC], n.d.). Pressures from both rural regions and the central government encourage university–*chiiki* (local) collaboration, and tourism programmes have simultaneously become popular in Japan, because tourism is often seen as an important tool for rural revitalisation (Yamada, 2016).

Today, *chiiki* is situated as the place for learning (Ohnishi et al., 2016); for example, the MEXT (2021) published the report *Chiiki-de-manabi, chiiki-wo-sasaeru* ('Learn in the local community and support the local community'). Communities in rural Japan often host *chiiki-juku* (local CBL programmes or seminars for the public), aiming to solve various issues in rural communities. *Chiiki-juku* are targeted at not only local residents but also potential migrants and other outsiders, creating a space for rethinking rural communities. Including *yosomono* (outsiders of local communities) in these programmes is important because they bring new perspectives that help identify issues and the strengths of a rural area (Shikida, 2009). Universities often provide intellectual support by sending teaching staff (*yosomono*) to the community, who often take on the role of lecturers to share their knowledge with the public and support the local community, while also achieving their KPI of contribution to society beyond academia. These collaborations are also a key strategy for universities to overcome financial difficulties (Utsunomiya, 2016). This indicates that Japanese universities and rural tourism communities have a relationship in which they complement each other for their own purposes. This form of collaboration between universities and rural communities is not limited to the relationship between teachers and communities; tourism students are also encouraged to be involved in local communities as a part of rural revitalisation initiatives

The Role of Universities in Revitalising Rural Japan: The Case of Community-based Learning

By increasing the roles and responsibility of universities as key players in rural revitalisation, CBL programmes in rural Japan have become common in tourism higher education (Fujii & Fujita, 2015; Ohnishi, 2016) because they can positively impact society and rural communities by enhancing the relationship between universities and local communities (MIC, n.d.). In the tourism literature, CBL programmes are considered part of educational tourism; university students become educational tourists who visit rural areas for educational purposes (Horiuchi, 2022; Ritchie, 2003). CBL programmes in rural Japan, which bring various benefits to rural communities, are often expected to contribute to rural revitalisation (Horiuchi, 2022; Uenoyama & Nagase, 2020). For example, CBL may increase rural migration post-graduation and enhance rural farmers'

pride and sense of community through positive interactions with urban students (Fujii & Fujita, 2015; Horiuchi, 2022). Additionally, CBL is considered a key strategy for equipping students with practical skills for both corporate and rural work (Uenoyama & Nagase, 2020; Utsunomiya, 2016).

Despite this win-win situation, a mismatch can occur between university and local community expectations, with the latter often complaining that universities do not deliver what the community desires (Nakatsuka & Odagiri, 2016). This system has also been criticised because university researchers tend to be exploited by community services, which reduces their available time and opportunities to conduct their own research (Nakakushi, 2020). Furthermore, sending students to rural regions involves risks, such as being misused as free labour (Ohnishi et al., 2016) and being discouraged from studying non-practical aspects of academic learning by being told that this knowledge is not ‘useful’ (Nakakushi, 2020). While much research has examined whether CBL is beneficial for both universities and local communities, theoretical exploration of this topic is limited. Most studies focus more on the outcomes of CBL by answering the questions of how a programme contributes to rural revitalisation and how universities should manage this programme for the development of rural human resources. To address this gap, this study first engages with what Gert Biesta (2022) calls ‘educational questions’ to understand how human beings transform through CBL programmes.

Educational Encounters: Transformative Tourism Education

Relational Pedagogy: A Brief Introduction

Following educational philosophers Gert Biesta and Sharon Todd, this study engages with educational questions to offer an alternative understanding of CBL programmes in rural Japan. These are existential questions that consider education as a process, with the possibility of unpredictable and unknown encounters and events that can contribute to the creation of human subjectivity (Biesta, 2022). Through these encounters and events, students try to exist as subjects or bring their own subject-ness, so that they respond to what and who is unique and different from themselves. For Biesta, this transformational process is *subjectification*, which is often dismissed by the current education system because it tends to emphasise the elements of *qualification* (equipping students with skills and knowledge) and *socialisation* (providing a direction to adapt the social norm; Biesta, 2013).

Since the latter two elements have been prioritised, higher education has become

increasingly ‘instrumentalised’ by taking an outcome-based and performance-oriented educational approach to solve problems and respond to the ‘uncertainty of the world’ (Todd, 2023). While Biesta (2022) acknowledges the importance of these two elements, education is not merely aimed at improving problem-solving. Subjectification does not address the question of how to engender or ‘produce’ democratic individuals but engages with the question of how individuals can be subjects – with their own subject-ness and responsibility (Biesta, 2022). This does not simply mean doing whatever they want; Biesta (2022) also highlights that this ‘subject-ness does not exist in a vacuum’ (2022 p. 8), meaning that education allows students to exist-as-subject ‘in’ and ‘with’ the world by ‘acknowledging that the world, natural and social, puts limits and limitations on what we can desire from it and can do with it’ (2022, p. 3). Todd (2023) might echo this statement, arguing that subjectification is an embodied process of becoming that cannot be accomplished as a solo endeavour but is instead achievable through a network of reciprocal relationships. Responding to Biesta, Todd (2023) also examined educational encounters, but not the level of encounters between teachers’ intervention and students’ responses. For her, encounters with the world are ‘touching to the present’, which emphasises encounters as touching a network of complex and messy times – *the present*. By doing so, she avoids the neutralisation of ‘encounters’ and situates encounters as requiring the mutual transformation of subjects/bodies when they come into contact with each other as well as with other elements in the world.

Both Biesta’s and Todd’s approaches to education align with relational ontology, in envisioning the role of education beyond the era of performance- and outcome-oriented or future-oriented approaches. They emphasise relational approaches to education by defining it as a relational and embodied practice that occurs with someone or something in the world. Following this philosophical approach, this study focuses more on process and relationship than on outcome to provide a nuanced understanding of CBL and the experience of transformation for students.

Transformative Education in Rural Japan: Opening the Possibility of Educational Encounters and Interruptions

The relationship between Japanese universities and local communities has rapidly changed over the last three decades. Inenaga (2024) reviewed education policy and other literature to examine how the local–university relationship has changed since the 1960s. Her analysis describes the 1990s as the development phase, with the university situated as a place for innovation. In the 2000s, the university was a central element in the creation

of the rural community, and in the 2010s, the university took responsibility for rural revitalisation, in which the collaboration of the two actors became more mutual. This trend is expanding, with discourses of ‘education for changing rural communities’ appearing not only in government reports but also on university websites and other media publications (e.g. MEXT, 2021; Turns, 2023). These narratives indicate the expanding role of qualification as a part of educational purposes, where students are equipped with the skills and abilities to revitalise rural communities. Previous literature also indicates that these programmes are important for not only equipping important skills and knowledge for rural revitalisation (qualification) but also shifting attitudes towards integrating rural society (socialisation; Uenoyama & Nagase, 2020). Within the current instrumentalised education system, education is often seen as a tool for solving problems (Todd, 2023). For Biesta, these educational outcomes align with the two dominant purposes of qualification and socialisation. However, most literature fails to address the Biesta’s key point: the educational purpose of subjectification.

Drawing on the philosophy of Levinas and other philosophers, Biesta (2013, 2016) and Höckert (2018) engage with the concept of ethical encounters, which help explore how CBL could create a space for bringing subject-ness to society and the world and how the involvement of other stakeholders outside the university has changed the purpose of education. Like many educational theorists, Biesta (2016) describes traditional education as managerialism, which might limit educators in taking responsibility for their actions. Within this, teaching is understood as controlling students and emphasising the role of the teacher in transmitting information and knowledge to students. In this relationship between teacher and student, Biesta argues that the ‘student can never appear as a subject’ (2016, p. 387). To cope with this, current education scholars have attempted to empower students to become free. In the constructivist paradigm, the learner-centred approach is prioritised: the learner becomes a meaning-maker. Biesta does not fully agree with this counter-opinion, calling this a *signification*. For him, this way of being is still aligned with an egoistic worldview, since it has never spoken back to society and remains focused on students themselves, which limits their freedom and the possibility of transformation (Biesta, 2016). Unlike signification and students being conceptualised as meaning-makers, subjectification requires external encounters and events that interrupt one’s way of being addressed by others. Here, Biesta emphasises the role of interruption, saying that ‘our subject-ness is not constituted from the “inside” through acts of interpretation and adaptation, but is called into being from the outside, as an interruption of my immanence, an interruption or fracturing of my being-with-myself, of my consciousness’ (Biesta, 2016, p. 388). These ideas emphasise the educational question of where and how students are

being addressed and taught by others, rather than how to create an educational environment for facilitating their individual learning. To avoid limiting their possibility of transformation and becoming egoistic, students must take risks, be open to what they are being taught, and embrace the uncertainty of the result of learning (Biesta, 2013).

Biesta's educational approach connects to what tourism researcher Höckert (2018) constantly argues is being open and welcome to the possibility of unexpected and unprepared events and encounters for the mutual transformation of hosts and guests (Höckert, 2018; Rantala & Höckert, 2024). Through an expanding understanding of the well-documented concept of 'hospitality' in tourism studies, Höckert (2018) also emphasises the role of ethical subjectivity and encounters, which is 'not about entering and visiting, but about welcoming, being and dwelling at home with the other' (p. 60). Here, she also takes a distance from egoistic beings and emphasises the importance of being and doing together with others. She further argues for the role of imagining 'ethical ways of encountering the other' that 'require not only welcoming the other, but also broadening one's perspective' (p. 62), calling this a 'hospitable encounter'. With this theoretical stance, her empirical research on rural farming communities in Nicaragua depicts the politics and complexity of hospitality, which is not simply about how the host welcomes others; she understands 'welcoming and hospitality as *interruption* of self' (p. 128; italics added). It is, therefore, negotiated practice that challenges host community's identity and their ontology and epistemology by 'putting into question one's freedom' (p. 128).

Both Biesta's subjectification and Höckert's envisioning of hospitable encounters emphasise the role of encounters, which create the opportunity for transformation through the interruption of the egoistic self. This process is also related to the transformative mode of learning supported by tourism education scholars (for example Edelheim et al., 2023; Hays & Tucker, 2022). The idea of being 'transformative' enables tourism educators to create educational spaces for encounters with multiple others by respecting the 'interdependency and interconnectedness of all beings' (Edelheim et al., 2023, p. 7). Therefore, Edelheim et al (2023) have attempted to transition from the traditional transmission mode of teaching to transformative and collective education. While their understanding of transformative education does not acknowledge Biesta's work on subjectification, there are many similarities in their arguments. Edelheim et al. (2023, p. 7) clearly highlight the important aspect of being subject in the world, saying that

an ultimate aim of learning experiences is to create a safe and caring environment that allow individuals to situate themselves, their personal values and their aspiration in the field of tourism... it is when students lean

to question their values and worldview as well as reflect on their own learning and on the ambitions that they have for their studies that actual transformation can take place.

While Edelheim et al. (2023) do not use the term ‘interruption’ in their text, this quote demonstrates the interruption as a key element of education that creates a space for students to question their values and existence, allowing them to live as subjects (Biesta, 2022). Biesta particularly emphasises the concept of educational encounters; the role of unexpected and unpredictable events and encounters is thus an important process. However, such encounters are not necessarily comfortable or welcomed. As Todd (2023) argues, these educational encounters are messy and complex, while Caton (2012) crucially highlights that relational subjects must exist comfortably with these complexities. Proximity tourism scholars (Rantala, Höckert, et al., 2024) echo this: ‘Proximity emphasizes being in touch with multiple others, even when it may result in discomfort and struggle’ (p. 2). By situating the learner amongst educational tourists as proximity tourists, I now elaborate on the possibility that the learner enters the world and society through interaction with various others.

Becoming Proximity Tourists: Community-based Learning for Relational Pedagogy

Collaborative Learning through Proximity Tourism

Similarly, as transformative learning requires encounters with others, Rantala and Höckert (2019) note that tourism is an industry and field of study that permits interaction with multiple others who are unique and distinct from tourists. While CBL programmes in rural Japan could be criticised as resulting from the neo-liberalisation of higher education, such programmes could also create opportunities for encounters with multiple others, making students see and touch the reality of the world (Todd, 2023). Thorsteinsson et al. (2024) argue that, unlike structured indoor learning programmes, outdoor learning provides opportunities for more dynamic interaction with multiple others. This interaction encourages students to collaborate with others to develop a holistic understanding of the tourism world-making process (Edelheim et al., 2023). In this context, collaboration does not simply mean working together to achieve a goal. Instead, I follow Grimwood and Höckert (2023): ‘[I]t is a process of engaging, slowing down, wondering, experimenting, and tinkering with relations to co-create knowledge and change for more caring tourism worlds’. This way of thinking is linked to the idea of proximity tourism, which not only

allows us to be geographically and physically close to others but also awakens our proximate, everyday surroundings in a new way (Salmela et al., 2021). Inspired by ongoing discussions on the Anthropocene, proximity tourism literature has shifted away from human-centric approaches to understanding tourism, instead envisioning more relational ways of knowing and researching. ‘Knowing-with’ has become an important epistemological stance not only for tourism researchers but also for students to give voice to marginalised human and non-human others and avoid the human-centric and egoistic approach of learning about others that focuses solely on their own merits (Rantala & Höckert, 2019).

While studies integrating proximity tourism into education are limited, two articles hint at the role of learning or being taught in proximity tourism practices (Milen et al., 2019; Rantala et al., 2020). Firstly, Milne et al. (2019) consider ‘children as tour guides’, examining how parents learn and know with children in nature-based tourism destinations. Children lead their parents to sense and touch a place, not just observe it. With sensory experiences led by their children, parents begin to see their local nature in a more curious and engaging way. Secondly, Rantala et al.’s (2020) study on geo-walking in a nature-based tourism destination also highlights an educational aspect, wherein participants can learn about current environmental issues as well as the process of geological transformation through walking, touching, and sensing stones and attending a 1-hour lecture before the trip begins. By focusing on the rhythmic entanglements of human and non-human elements, this study examined how participants feel and sense the temporal dimension of stones, highlighting the need for tourists to slow down and tune into a place by learning the rhythmic entanglements of the histories of these everyday surroundings. This engaging style of travelling evokes care for others rather than against or in resistance to them by situating tourists as a part of others, enabling them to implement the ontological stance of being-for-others and being-with-others. The two aforementioned articles suggest that the concept of proximity in these educational settings focuses not only on how students/tourists learn ‘about’ something but also on collaborative and collective ways of learning ‘with’ multiple others who are co-creators of tourism knowledge (Edelheim et al., 2023).

Proximatising Educational Tourism: Towards Mutual Collaboration

Since Japanese universities are now responsible for rural revitalisation initiatives, much Japanese literature notes the crucial role of CBL programmes and other educational tourism, which allow young people to visit highly ageing and depopulated areas and

potentially bring new and fresh perspectives into rural communities, thus interrupting the local community (Fujii & Fujita, 2015). Fujii and Fujita (2015) have demonstrated how encounters with young university students transform rural farmers' identities through *the Kagami* (Miller) effect; in this process, farmers reflect on themselves and gain their pride back (Fujii & Fujita, 2015; Horiuchi, 2022). This could be understood as the process of 'interruption' of themselves, creating an opportunity to reflect on their value and worldview. However, this conclusion may be overly simplistic in assessing the impact of CBL. For Biesta and proximity tourism scholars, these approaches may focus too narrowly on how a programme solves a problem in a rural community, leaving both rural communities and students as objects. Rantala, Kinnunen, et al. (2024) emphasise relational thinking in proximity tourism research, which does not aim to 'produce fixed objects or orders' but rather is an ongoing thinking practice (p. 9). Following this epistemological stance, proximity tourism enables 'a caring, curious and sensitive orientation towards our proximate surroundings, beings, and thoughts' (Rantala, Höckert, et al. 2024, p. 1). This approach aligns with Biesta's understanding of education: to slow down, allowing students to stay in trouble (Biesta, 2022). For him, as with other proximity tourism scholars, proximity is not simply a matter of physical closeness; rather, it is 'attention' and 'waiting' (Biesta, 2010, p. 72). He continues, '[P]roximity is something that has to be "achieved" again and again and that crucially depends upon our own, individual efforts and commitments to be attentive, to wait, and so on'.

This way of thinking is linked to the idea of the interruption of pedagogy, while emphasising ongoing negotiations within the world of plurality. Ignoring this plurality and complexity of the world, the students were not interrupted or called by others. Interruption occurs when students enter a world of plurality and become open towards others and prepare for unexpected and unwelcome events. This theoretical synthesis between the two lines of literature – relational pedagogy and proximity tourism – enables us to question and challenge the dominant understanding of CBL, which tends to evaluate its role based on how it contributes to the revitalisation of rural community (cf., Fujita, 2016; Nakatsuka & Odagiri, 2016) or how students obtain the skills and attitudes needed in rural communities (Uenoyama & Nagase, 2020). By posing these outcome-oriented approaches, the idea of proximity focuses more on educational relationships and processes and provides an alternative space for examining how students/tourists exist as subjects in the world, while also allowing local communities to be subjects. Biesta (2013) understands this reciprocal relationship as a subject–subject relationship, in which students and the local community exist as subjects without being at the centre of the world and without remaining objects to each other.

Unlike in ordinary travel experiences, educational tourists actively participate and immerse themselves in a place to expand their knowledge and broaden their perspectives (Nagai & Kashiwagi, 2018; Ritchie, 2003). This form of tourism prioritises the act of learning, a key aspect of this travel experience. In other words, it also enables students to be open to being taught by others who differ from them. Unlike ordinary learning experiences inside school, students are given the opportunity to learn *from* and *about* various others. These are important elements of being proximity tourists, which enable students to pay close attention to others and to become responsible for and careful and sensitive towards others (Rantala, Höckert, et al. 2024; Rantala, Kinnunen, et al., 2024). CBL, as an educational tourism initiative, emphasises the establishment of deep connections with the local community. This encourages students to foster mutual guest–host (Höckert, 2018) and subject–subject relationships (Biesta, 2013), because these collaborative learning programmes are predicated on these relationships.

Concluding Discussions

In this article, I attempt to deconstruct the existing discourse on CBL, which is commonly studied with a focus on its outcomes and future implications. By offering alternative perspectives on the role of CBL programmes in tourism higher education, I aim to provide new insights into this topic. Unlike the popular research approach, through this study, I did not answer questions such as how universities can contribute to the revitalisation of rural community or how the local community can help universities equip students with practical skills. Instead, I transcended outcome-oriented education and engaged with educational (existential) questions, envisioning alternative ontologies for tourism education and the role of CBL. By synthesising two lines of literature – relational pedagogy from education and proximity tourism from tourism studies – this study demonstrates the possibility of situating CBL as educational and proximity tourism activities that could contribute to the mutual transformation of students (Biesta, 2013; Todd, 2023) and rural tourism communities (Höckert, 2018).

This study also highlights that the role of tourism educators and other stakeholders in CBL is not limited to facilitating students' learning experiences; rather, they must challenge and interrupt students, encouraging them to question their existence and values (Biesta, 2013; Edelheim et al., 2023). For students, it is important to prepare for unwelcome encounters to challenge themselves so that they can transform and exist as subjects in the world. Unlike indoor and structured learning on campus, CBL encompasses these unexpected events; the reality of rural communities, where values and

worldviews are contested, is messy. For students to appear as subjects in the world, it is essential to establish mutual, subject–subject relationships amongst students, educators, and local communities. This means that CBL can be key in not only transforming students but also inspiring them to envision engaging, slow, and caring ways of doing tourism while maintaining their host community as a subject.

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