

**Florin NECHITA**  
**(Editor)**

**Transilvania Creative Camp 2025:  
Project-Based Learning for  
Creative Destinations and  
Engaged Communities**



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## **Transilvania Creative Camp 2025:**

### **Project-Based Learning for Creative Destinations and Engaged Communities – Introduction and Overview**

**Florin NECHITA**

*Transilvania University of Braşov, ROMANIA*

Transilvania Creative Camp (TCC) has grown, edition by edition, into a project far more significant than a summer school. Over time, it has become a shared learning space, a laboratory for new ideas and collaborative projects, and a meeting point for universities, cultures, generations, and local communities. The 2025 edition marks the fourth chapter of a journey that began in 2014 as a project-based learning initiative for communication students, organized in Braşov County under the name Leo AdCamp (Nechita et al., 2014). Starting with the second edition, the project moved to Lăpuş Land and changed its name to “Transilvania Creative Camp – Creative Destinations and Heritage Interpretation Summer School.” From the very beginning, however, one core assumption has guided the project: meaningful destination promotion cannot exist without a deep understanding of the places being promoted, respect for local heritage, and genuine human connections with local communities.

On a personal level, organizing the three editions of the TCC project in Târgu Lăpuş and Lăpuş Land since 2016 holds special significance for me. This is the place where I was born, where I spent my early childhood, and where many formative experiences shaped my understanding of community, tradition, and belonging.

Bringing together students and colleagues from different parts of the world in this region is both a professional responsibility and an emotional commitment. It reflects a desire to give visibility to a place that deserves to be known on its own terms, not through clichés or simplified narratives.

I write this introduction to the project volume of Transilvania Creative Camp 2025 (TCC 2025) from State College, Pennsylvania, within the walls of Pattee and Paterno Libraries at Penn State University. My current research stay as a Fulbright Scholar in Rural Sociology is closely connected to my previous projects developed in Țara Lăpușului (Lăpuș Land, as I will refer to it throughout this chapter and in all my work on the region of Northern Transylvania where I was born).

During my stay at Penn State University, I engaged in deeper critical reflection on rural studies and on how my own perceptions of rural life influenced the design of the Transilvania Creative Camp (TCC) project and its potential future editions. Drawing on Murdoch et al. (2003), as cited in one of the books I discovered there, two main and often conflicting narratives about the rural emerge (Slack and Monnat, 2024). The first, pastoralist and pre-modern, frames rural areas as repositories of cultural values and even national identity, with pastoralists seeking to preserve an idealized vision of rural life from external influences. In contrast, the modernist perspective views rural areas as lagging behind, emphasizing the need for transformation and development so that residents can enjoy the tangible benefits of modern life. Even after reading Slack and Monnat's (2024) work on rural and small-town America, I found myself leaning toward a pastoralist perspective, at least in relation to the Lăpuș region. With Pop et al. (2023) in hand, I can confidently say that in the context of TCC, I am decidedly a pastoralist. It may be easy to live in one of the most beautiful cities in Romania, yet I find myself taking the best part of the old ways when I look back nostalgically at my childhood in Târgu Lăpuș.

Following this introductory chapter, the book presents the schedule of the summer school project, including the topics addressed prior to the field program. This overview helps to better understand my approach to designing the project content. TCC 2025 was organized as an Erasmus+ Blended Intensive Programme (BIP), which required the inclusion of an online component. Accordingly, the program featured two online sessions before the field activities and one session afterward. The post-field online meeting focused on refining the tangible outputs of the project, which consisted of two films and five tourism promotional leaflets, with each team producing one thematic leaflet.

Beyond the materials directly related to TCC 2025, this volume includes two contributions by long-standing partners from Meisei University, Tokyo: Professor Emeritus Hiromasa Tanaka and Professor Takanori Kawamata. Professor Tanaka's chapter draws on his direct involvement in TCC 2016, while Professor Kawamata reflects on his experience at TCC 2023. Since the 2016 edition resulted in a jointly edited project volume (Nechita & Tanaka, 2017), TCC 2023 was not formally documented through a similar publication, even though its outcomes were disseminated through academic conferences and public events.

Both distinguished professors from Meisei University were also part of TCC 2025 through online participation. Even in the absence of a physical presence from Japan, the project continues to be known among stakeholders in Lăpuș Land as “școala de vară cu japonezii” (the summer school with Japanese students). This local perception reflects the strong legacy of TCC 2016, which functioned as a genuinely Romanian–Japanese summer school, with Professor Tanaka leading a group of two professors and fourteen Japanese students.

Although TCC 2023 did not result in a formal project volume, by the end of 2025 I was pleased to see the publication of an academic article by Anna Miśkowiec from

the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow, Poland (Miśkowiec, 2025). In addition to its strong theoretical framing of intercultural educational activities aimed at developing communication competences, the article provides a detailed account of the edition, informed by the author's dual role as both a supporting teacher and an observer during TCC 2023. Also included among the references at the end of this introduction are two films produced after the TCC 2023 project, in which the contributions of two participants were particularly significant. I would like to once again thank all participants of TCC 2023, with special mention of Tibor Pintér from the University of Dunaújváros and Nicușor Amarie from Transilvania University of Brașov. I would also like to acknowledge Mihaela Parghel, whose drone footage not only appears in the two films mentioned above, but also inspired me to acquire a drone specifically for TCC 2025.

In addition to its primary focus on TCC 2025, the present volume also includes a chapter authored by Lorenzo Bottino, a master's student in Sociology, and Anna Sofia Monticelli, a student of Intercultural Communication at the Università degli Studi di Torino. Their contribution reflects an unforgettable experience lived in the summer of 2024 in Groșii Țibleșului, a village included in the program of all three editions of TCC held in Lăpuș Land. Motivated by a strong interest in local culture and traditions, the two students participated in the UNITA Rural Mobility program, an initiative of the UNITA European University Alliance that offers students from partner universities, including Transilvania University of Brașov, the opportunity to engage in month-long practical experiences in rural communities. The program seeks to foster a deeper understanding of local ways of life, social interactions, and cultural heritage. Their chapter was initially conceived as the basis for a tourism promotion brochure, grounded in their everyday lived experience in the village.

The part of the book dedicated to TCC 2025 brings together the outcomes and personal reflections generated during the project, held between 22 and 28 August in Târgu Lăpuș and several surrounding villages in Lăpuș Land, along with theoretical contributions from participating lecturers. The main aim of this volume is to document what the participants learned, how they collaborated, and how they experienced a place rich in history, traditions, and natural beauty—a place that is still seeking ways to integrate creative tourism as a form of development. The more conceptually oriented articles aim to outline the key perspectives that underpin the project and to highlight the multiple angles from which it can be further valorized within the academic field.

The chapters proposed by Berardi, Malcolm, and Brennan provide a strong conceptual foundation for the future development of the TCC project by foregrounding community development in connection with the valorization of local heritage. While the preparatory phase of the TCC project already involved dialogue with multiple stakeholders across communities in Lăpuș Land, these two chapters, when placed in context with the rest of the book, help explain why the authors emphasize that local culture offers distinct opportunities for place-based economic and social development. The techniques and community development steps have been developed over decades, and a synthesis of these has also been included in a range of outreach and cooperative training materials prepared by the authors for educators at the University of Florida and Pennsylvania State University. They argue that community understandings of local history are not fixed but are shaped by past events and continuously reinterpreted in response to present-day needs, values, and aspirations. From this perspective, initiatives such as TCC must be more deeply interwoven with local perspectives, particularly regarding what communities wish to sustain and how they choose to engage.

The chapter by Bernad-Vicente analyzes TCC 2025 from a project-based learning perspective and draws not only on the author's experience as a participating PhD student, but also highlights the results of a study conducted among the other participants. The information was collected using a self-administered ad hoc questionnaire in Google Forms, which was sent to participants one week after the end of the project via the WhatsApp group.

Florina Ciupe's chapter, *Empathic Teaching as a Catalyst for Student Engagement and Wellbeing*, highlights the transformative experiences of students participating in the Transilvania Creative Camp. As an English teacher, she emphasizes how real-life communication in class is often only simulated, whereas the camp offered authentic intercultural encounters. The findings are framed from a perspective that considers empathic teaching as a reflective practice integrating emotional understanding with pedagogical action.

The chapter by Piotr and Katarzyna Drag from the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow is grounded in participant observation, as they engaged in all stages of TCC 2023 and TCC 2025 as academic teachers and facilitators, while also drawing on the fresh memory of a similar BIP organized in Krakow and its surroundings. Their dual role allowed close, long-term observation of students' interactions, learning processes, and intercultural encounters in both formal and informal settings. The analysis is enriched by a reflexive qualitative approach, based on field notes, informal conversations, and ongoing interpretation of shared experiences. Combining participant observation with reflexive pedagogical analysis, the chapter provides an in-depth understanding of how intercultural and media competences are developed through experiential, collaborative, and culturally embedded learning practices.

Ana Biescas's chapter demonstrates, from both perspectives of the author as an academic and an experienced management professional, that TCC 2025 serves as a

replicable model for experiential learning and sustainable entrepreneurship. She also proposes future improvements for upcoming editions, such as incorporating longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of such interventions on local economies and students' career trajectories. In addition, integrating new digital platforms for the broader dissemination of student outputs could enhance visibility and scalability.

The small yet highly active team from Stuttgart Media University, Dr. Nicolai Schädel as teacher and facilitator together with students Pascal Holl and Moritz Mötzung, offers personal and heartfelt reflections on their experiences within TCC 2025. Their contributions demonstrate beyond their strong technical and practical expertise demonstrated during the camp, reflecting their background at a prestigious university of applied sciences, they also possess a sharp sense of anthropological observation, expressed with remarkable clarity and conciseness. This perspective extends beyond the skills Pascal and Moritz demonstrated as videographers and drone pilots, adding depth and reflexivity to their engagement with the project.

The chapter by Krisztina Sitku from the University of Dunaújváros, *Transilvania CreativeCamp as a Service Learning Project: Strengths and Hidden Potentials*, is built around a model for service learning in higher education previously developed by the author, drawing on the academic literature to date and on her previous investigation of this project. Beyond applying a deductive thematic analysis of previous editions of the TCC project, she also analyzed her field notes from the empirical part of TCC BIP 2025, namely the participatory observations of places, events, activities, and informal conversations with locals at the TCC project sites in Lăpuș Land, using qualitative data analysis methods. The author's framing and approach to service learning include practical recommendations that are useful for the future development of the TCC programme, as well as for organisers of similar projects.

As the professor of digital photography and the most devoted participant in documenting the TCC edition, Iosif Trif's chapter invites readers to reflect on how we look at the world, how we select what deserves to be framed, and how we preserve reality through images. Lăpuș Land inscribed itself into his memory as something greater than himself. He came to realise that his photographs ultimately became signs of being accepted, if only momentarily, into the natural order of a place that knows how to preserve its sense of eternity through the simplest of things. In this sense, Iosif Trif did not photograph the past; rather, he was, in a way, captured by a place in which life reveals itself through people, symbols, gestures, and light as what it truly is: a quiet thirst and longing to endure in eternity. I hope that this chapter will serve as the opening of a larger project that will more fully valorise his remarkable collection of photographs taken during his first encounter with Lăpuș Land.

The first and most cohesive part of the book concludes with the reflections of Faustyna Zaleśna, a PhD student at the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow. In a concise yet evocative manner, she preserves moments from TCC 2025, ranging from collective reflections on heritage preservation and immersive village visits that foregrounded sustainability and pride in local roots, to the warmth with which residents welcomed us into their modest homes, sharing stories of mining heritage passed down through generations, offering sips of homemade plum brandy, and proudly presenting jars of fresh honey straight from their hives. Writing in a personal, journal-like tone, Faustyna not only brings the first part of the book, whose contributors are listed in alphabetical order, to a meaningful close, but also offers a natural and sensitive introduction to the final section, #MyLăpuș, where several participants distilled, in two pages, their experience in Lăpuș Land.

At its core, TCC is an educational project developed by the Faculty of Sociology and Communication of Transilvania University of Brașov. It responds to a contemporary

need in higher education: to move learning beyond the classroom and into real-life contexts, where theory meets practice and where students are challenged to think critically and creatively. In this sense, all TCC editions have functioned as intensive, interdisciplinary, and international learning environments focused on creative destination promotion and heritage interpretation.

The 2025 edition brought together 25 students representing 11 nationalities and nine universities from across Europe, complemented by academic partners from Japan and the United States. Five universities are members of the UNITA – Universitas Montium alliance, while others joined the project as long-standing or newly established collaborators. This diversity of academic backgrounds, cultures, and perspectives proved once again to be one of the project's greatest strengths. Students approached the same places, stories, and traditions through different lenses, enriching both the learning process and the final outputs.

The thematic structure of TCC 2025 was designed to reflect the complexity and richness of Lăpuș Land. Each team focused on one of five themes proposed by the organizers: traditions, folklore, and traditional costume; wooden churches and local history; gastronomy; crafts and agricultural work; and natural heritage. These themes cannot be separated, as they are all strongly interconnected, but they served as starting points for guiding teamwork rather than rigid frameworks. Participants were encouraged to explore, question, observe, and listen before proposing different forms of promotion for the area.

With the first edition organized in Lăpuș Land in 2016, I considered it important, as organizer, to involve not only Romanian and international students, but also high school students from “Petru Rareș” Theoretical High School in Târgu Lăpuș. This distinctive feature of the participants' profile paid off from multiple perspectives. First, through the participation of high school students, TCC gave back a small part

of the invaluable support received from the management and teachers of “Petru Rareș” Theoretical High School in Târgu Lăpuș. I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to Mariana Pop, Florina Ciupe, and Claudiu Nedea. The second gain was that local students contributed insider perspectives. Over time, I discovered that one of my greatest satisfactions is being able to engage local youth in seeing Lăpuș Land through the eyes of the other participants. I am now reflecting more deeply on how to involve a greater number of local high school students in future projects, including upcoming editions of TCC. By incorporating my experience as a Fulbright Scholar at Penn State University, future TCC editions will be better equipped to engage local high school students in addressing community challenges through place branding and creative solutions, fostering a hands-on approach to solving local issues.

What will the next edition bring (TCC 2027 or TCC 2028)? As Dr. Katarzyna Drag once remarked during TCC 2025, when we found ourselves attending an authentic wedding in the village of Ungureni and were naturally welcomed, as a group of nearly forty people, into the groom’s household and the ceremony itself, “After participating in 2023, I thought that by 2025 I would no longer be able to discover anything new or surprising about Lăpuș Land.” Yet Lăpuș Land continues to be a place of positive surprises, shaped by people eager to share the richness of their local culture. I am therefore more than confident that future editions will once again reveal new facets of this true cultural treasure that is Lăpuș Land.

Fieldwork played a central role throughout the week. Students conducted interviews with local residents, artisans, farmers, and other community representatives; participated in everyday activities; observed rituals and practices; and documented their experiences through photography and video. This process was intentionally immersive. The goal was not to “extract” content, but to understand the rhythms, values, and meanings embedded in local life. This project

would not have been possible without the dedication, trust, and hospitality of all those who welcomed us, often beyond formal roles, into their communities, homes, and landscapes. TCC has always been, at its core, about co-creation, reciprocity, and mutual learning. Only through such an approach can a destination be truly understood, allowing students' promotional plans to avoid superficiality and to generate valuable ideas for sustainable and respectful tourism development.

Under the guidance of the academic team and the communication professionals involved in the project, participants transformed their collected data into concrete communication outputs. These included video materials, visual narratives, and social media-oriented content, all designed to address potential visitors while remaining faithful to the identity of the place. For both TCC 2023 and TCC 2025, two English-language promotional films represent some of the most visible outcomes of the project and were made available to local authorities for future promotional use.

The value of Transilvania Creative Camp goes beyond producing promotional materials and creative communication ideas. From the start, the project was designed as a platform for applied research, with data from field activities contributing to studies on destination branding, heritage interpretation, intercultural communication, and sustainable tourism. Insights from TCC are continually analyzed, presented at national and international conferences, and published in academic journals. In this way, the project creates a coherent bridge between education, practice, and research.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the City Hall of Târgu Lăpuș, the administrations of the surrounding communes involved in the project, and “Petru Rareș” Theoretical High School for their trust, collaboration, and hospitality. Being here in Pennsylvania, coming from Northern Transylvania, is the result of writing my Fulbright scholarship application at Penn State University, with the TCC project as a

starting point. This project has been—and I hope will continue to be—possible thanks to the strong support of the many stakeholders involved in all three editions of TCC held in Lăpuș Land. My heartfelt appreciation goes to the mayors and representatives of the local administrations of Târgu Lăpuș, Cupșeni, Băiuț, Lăpuș, Groșii Țibleșului, Suci de Sus, Vîma Mică, and the surrounding villages, whose openness and support made meaningful fieldwork and authentic encounters possible.

I am deeply grateful to our academic colleagues and invited experts from Romania and abroad, who contributed inspiring lectures, workshops, and field-based insights, bridging theory and practice in destination branding, storytelling, cultural anthropology, heritage interpretation, tourism marketing, and community engagement. Special thanks go to the local artists, rangers, guides, and community custodians, who generously shared their places, stories, and traditions with our participants. Encounters with community members transformed Lăpuș Land into a living classroom and reminded us that heritage is sustained first and foremost by people. The bus drivers and the empathetic staff of the “Petru Rareș” Theoretical High School Canteen also remain in the hearts and minds of TCC participants.

A special thanks must also be addressed to the students, whose energy and curiosity keep all of us motivated to guide them in discovering this magical place, Lăpuș Land.

As the final section of this book, titled *#MyLăpuș*, brings together a rich collection of images captured by the participants, please allow me to close the volume with a visual expression of my gratitude to some of those who made TCC possible. These photographs offer a small glimpse into the people behind this project. Many others, whom we encountered daily in Târgu Lăpuș and the surrounding villages, are absent from this personal selection, even though they welcomed us warmly throughout the week. Some moments simply unfolded too quickly to be captured, as the intense rhythm of activities left little time for photographs.

Finally, this volume invites readers to look at Țara Lăpușului not only as a destination, but as a living cultural landscape shaped by people, memories, and everyday practices. It also invites reflection on how future professionals in communication, tourism, and related fields can act responsibly when telling the stories of places that are not their own. If Transilvania Creative Camp 2025 succeeds in inspiring such reflection, then its educational mission has been fulfilled.

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<b>PROGRAMME FOR TRANSILVANIA CREATIVE CAMP 2025 (TCC 2025)</b>		
Educational partners	Transilvania University of Brasov (Romania), University of Torino (Italy), University of Zaragoza (Spain), Polytechnic Institute of Guarda (Portugal), University of Dunaujvaros (Hungary), The Pontifical University John Paul II in Krakow (Poland), Polytechnic University of the Marche (Italy), Meisei University Tokyo (Japan), Penn State University (USA), Petru Rareş High School Târgu Lăpuş (Romania)	
Timetable (Romanian time/ GMT + 3)	Activities/ Sessions	Lecturer, Place & Other observations
<b>DAY 1 - Friday, 22.08.2025 - Brasov-Sighișoara-Târgu Lăpuş</b>		
8:30 - 16:30	Road to Lăpuş Land and short visit to Sighișoara medieval town	
17.00 - 17.30	Opening ceremony and welcome speeches Vlad HERMAN, Mayor of Târgu Lăpuş Mariana POP, director of Petru Rareş High School Târgu Lăpuş	
17.30 - 18.00	TCC2025: objectives and final creative outputs dr. Florin NECHITA, Transilvania University of Brasov	
18.00- 18.30	Brief presentation of the Lăpuş Land Nicoleta BUD, Nicoleta POP, Center for Tourism Promotion Târgu Lăpuş	
18.30 - 19.30	Before entering the Field: TCC as an academic research project dr. Krisztina SITKU, University of Dunaujvaros	
19:30 - 20:30	The life of a campaign & creative techniques Sorin PSATTA, University of Bucharest	
<b>DAY 2 - Saturday, 23.08.2025 - Rogoz, Cupşeni and Ungureni villages</b>		
8:30 - 09:15	From roots to routes: storytelling as a branding driver dr. Ana BIESCAS, University of Zaragoza	
9:45 - 10:30	Travel copywriting strategies and ideas (online) Cătălin IONAŞCU, Romanian Copywriter	

10.30 - 4.30	Visit to Rogoz Wooden Church and local museum
11.30 - 13.30	How to protect and valorize the intangible heritage Călina MÂRZAC, Rogoz Museum
13.30 - 14.00	Meaning in images: using technology and techniques to shape visual stories Iosif TRIF, Transilvania University of Braşov
14.00 - 14.30	Storytelling in communication of cultural heritage dr. Piotr DRAG, dr. Katarzyna DRAG, The Pontifical University John Paul II Krakow
14.45 - 15.30	Workshop on wooden sculpture Nicolae ŞERBAN, local artist, Rogoz
16.00 - 16.50	The art and principles of capturing images: from vision to frame Iosif TRIF, Transilvania University of Braşov, Țara li Pinteia, Cupşeni, and Wooden Church in Cupşeni
16:50 - 17.00	Welcome address speech Nicolae BUDE, Mayor of Cupşeni
17.00 - 18.30	Traditional wedding ceremony Libotin and Ungureni villages
18.30- 19.00	Welcoming the buffalo herd Rogoz village
19.15 - 20.30	Creating the online content of the day & working on team presentations working in five teams
<b>DAY 3 - Sunday, 24.08.2025 - Poiana Botizii, Băiuţ and Lăpuş villages</b>	
8.30 - 9:30	Trip to Strâmbu Băiuţ Virgin Forest – UNESCO World Heritage Site
9.00 - 9.20	Visit to Poiana Botizii wooden church Poiana Botizii village
9.30 - 12.30	Guided Tour of Strâmbu Băiuţ Virgin Forest – UNESCO World Heritage Site Florin MÂRZAC, Head of Strâmbu-Băiuţ Forest Management Unit

10.00- 10.30	Introduction to Forest Therapy in the Ancient Forest of Poiana Botizii Walter ÜBELHART, biologist and certificate shinrin-yoku therapist, Johannes Banfi Hunyades Multicultural Association
12.30 - 13:00	Trip to Baiuț village
13.00 - 15.00	Miner's Day festivities Băiuț
17.00 - 17.10	Welcome address speech Krisztiana BERTOTI, Mayor of Băiuț
15.00- 16.00	Discovering the multicultural Băiuț with Walter ÜBELHART Băiuț and Strâmbu Băiuț villages
16:00- 16:45	Working on team presentations working in five teams
16.45 - 17.00	Trip to Lăpuș village
17.00 - 17.10	Welcome address speech Cristina BUDA, Mayor of Lăpuș
17.10 - 19.30	Hai la joc în șezătoare (traditional songs, dances & folklore program) Lăpuș
20.00-20.30	Youth as change-makers: driving sustainable futures in rural communities dr. Mark A. Brennan, Professor and UNESCO Chair on Global Citizenship Education for Sustainable Peace through Youth and Community Engagement within Penn State Global
20.30- 21.00	Creating the online content of the day & working on team presentations working in five teams
<b>DAY 4 – Monday, 25.08.2025- Groșii Tiblesului, Suci de Sus and Dămăcușeni villages</b>	
8.30 - 9.15	Target in the future: creative initiatives that hit the mark José Antonio Visiedo, University of Zaragoza
9:15 - 10:00	How to plan a presence at an international tourism fair (online) Valentin Văcăruș, Managing Partner Godmother

10.00- 10.30	Trip to Groșii Țibleșului village
10:30- 10.40	Welcome address speech Nicolaie BURZO, Mayor of Groșii Țibleșului
10.40 - 11:30	Agriculture practices in Lăpuș Land Groșii Țibleșului village
11:30 - 12.30	Hay making workshop Groșii Țibleșului village
12.30 - 13.30	Regenerating the forest resources Groșii Țibleșului village
14.30- 16.00	Guardians of intangible heritage (meeting with Pălăguța COSMA, Nicolae and Aurelia POP) Groșii Țibleșului village
16.20 - 16.30	Welcome address speech Ionel TODORAN, Mayor of Suciul de Sus
16.30 - 17.00	Visit to the wooden church in Larga Village Larga Village
17.00 - 17.30	Visit to Jewish Cemetery from Suciul de Sus village Robert Cotos, Asociația Maramureș Heritage
16:30 - 17:30	Creating the online content of the day & working on team presentations
18:00- 20:30	Hungarian evening Dămăcușeni village
19.00-20.00	Creating the online content of the day & working on team presentations
<b>DAY 5 – Tuesday, 26.08.2025 – Drăghia, Vima Mică, Peteritea, and Răzoare villages</b>	
8:30 - 9:15	Leveraging online campaigns on Facebook, Instagram and TikTok (online) Ovidiu Bălcăcian, The Pharmacy

9:15 - 9:45	Heritage Interpretation basic principles dr. Adina CANDREA, Transilvania University of Brasov
9:45 - 10:15	Trip to Draghia village
10.15 - 11.00	Visit to the wooden church in Drăghia Village
11.15 - 12.00	Sheep herding: visit to a sheepfold in Vima Mare
12:00 - 14.30	Cultural Anthropology fieldwork in Vima Mică and Peteritea villages dr. Silviu COPOSESCU, Transilvania University of Brasov
14:30 - 14.40	Welcome address speech Liviu BALINT, Mayor of Vima Mică
15.30 - 16.30	Forests, mushrooms, berries and the local gastronomic heritage Viorel COROIAN, Ranger Cheile Lăpuşului Natural Reservation
16.30 - 17.30	Wildlife Photography: Birds and Beavers in Cheile Lăpuşului Nature Reserve Viorel COROIAN, Ranger Cheile Lăpuşului Natural Reservation
17.30 - 18.30	Creating the online content of the day & working on team presentations Răzoare village
19.00- 19.30	Legal issues in the context of Movie Production dr. Nicolai SCHADEL, Stuttgart Media University
<b>DAY 6 – Wednesday, 27.08.2025 – Târgu Lăpuş, Rohia, Rohița, Boiereni</b>	
8.30 - 9.15	How to be creative in destination marketing campaigns Sorin PSATTA, University of Bucharest
9:15 - 9:45	Building an online community around Jewish heritage in Maramures Robert Cotos, Asociația Maramureș Heritage
10:00 - 12.00	Discovering intercultural Târgu Lăpuş Reformed Church, Orthodox Church, Roman Catholic Church, Greek Catholic Church, former Synagogue site
12:15 - 12.45	Visit to Saint Angels Monastery Lighet, Târgu Lăpuş

13:00 - 13.45	Visit to Rohia Monastery Rohia village
14:00 - 15.30	Visit to Rohiița Monastery Rohiița Monastery
16:00 - 17.30	Cultural Anthropology fieldwork in Boiereni village dr. Silviu COPOSESCU, Transilvania University of Brasov
18:00 - ....	Creating the online content of the day & working on team presentations
<b>DAY 7 – Thursday, 28.08.2025 – Project presentations and departure to Brasov</b>	
8:30 - 11.00	Project presentations Award ceremony
<b>First online meeting – Saturday, 19.07.2025 – bbb.unitbv.ro</b>	
15.00-15.05	Welcome address Florin NECHITA, Transilvania University of Brasov
15.05-15.30	TCC as EFL research project Takanori KAWAMATA, Meisei University
15.30- 15.50	Presentation of the partner universities all participants
15.50- 17.15	Presentation of the participants all participants
17.15 - 17.30	History of TCC project and objectives of TCC2025 Florin NECHITA, Transilvania University of Brasov
17.30-17.45	Q & A session regarding organization and practical issues of TCC2025
17.45-18.00	Homework assignment for August 16th
<b>Second online meeting – Saturday, 16.08.2025 - bbb.unitbv.ro</b>	
13.30- 3.45	Sustainable rural destinations from around the world Team 2

13.45- 14.15	New intercultural communication competency development Hiromasa TANAKA, Professor Emeritus, Meisei University and Managing Consultant, Management Climate Lab, LCC
14.15 - 15.15	Sustainable rural destinations from around the world Team 1, 3-5
15.15- 15.45	How to make video content marketing effective Diana LĂPUȘNEANU, Social Media Specialist, Mondly
15.45- 16.15	TCC as a Service Learning project: The student perspective Krisztina SITKU, University of Dunaujvaros
16.15- 16.30	Q & A session regarding organization and practical issues of TCC2025
<b><i>Third online meeting – Saturday, 13.09.2025 - Zoom</i></b>	
12.00 - 15.00	Working on the final version of the promotional movies for Lăpuș Land all participants

# **From Transilvania Creative Camp 2016 to Industry 5.0: Communities of Practice and Human Capital Development in Japan**

**Hiromasa TANAKA**

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## **Introduction**

It has been nearly a decade since I participated in Transilvania Creative Camp 2016 (TCC 2016) with a group of students from Meisei University, Japan. For all of us, it was the first time visiting the community of Lăpuș Land in Romania. For more than half of my students, it was also their first experience collaborating with participants of diverse languages, ages, cultural backgrounds, and disciplinary specializations. The group included local residents, university students from Romania and Italy, marketing and advertising professionals, photographers, and tourism specialists.

The program's goal—destination marketing—was new to my students, whose academic focus was international studies. They also faced the challenge of using English as a working language, introducing linguistic and cultural complexities to their teamwork.

Before TCC 2016, I had applied Wenger's (2000) concept of Communities of Practice (CoP) to various project-based learning programs, typically within culturally homogenous or same-age cohorts. The multi-dimensional diversity of TCC 2016, encompassing nationality, language, profession, and discipline, provided a far richer environment for intercultural learning.

## **Background and Structure**

Curious about what my students would learn through this experience, I conducted ethnographic research—including fieldnotes, video recordings, post-program reports, and interviews. My initial analysis (Tanaka, 2022) identified a four-stage shift in communicative attitudes (Du Bois, 2007), from initial distancing to eventual commitment, signifying deep literacy and identity development through participation (Jansen, 2014).

Since retiring from academia, I have worked as a human resource development (HRD) consultant. In reflecting on TCC 2016 through the lens of my current consulting practice, I recognize its enduring relevance. The business system transformation initiated by Industry 4.0 and Society 5.0 has required corporations to adapt not only technologically but also organizationally. This transformation necessitates a reconfiguration of human resource management, including recruitment, talent development, and continuous learning systems (Kuś, 2024).

This paper is structured as follows: First, it outlines the changing nature of business communication and employee competencies required in Japan's evolving work environment. Second, it presents findings from qualitative research on HRD programs conducted between 2022 and 2025, focusing on how employees adapt to technological and cultural change. Finally, it connects these findings to the earlier TCC 2016 case study to illustrate how interdisciplinary and intercultural collaboration fosters the competencies essential for Industry 4.0 and Society 5.0 workplaces. Through this analysis, I argue that learning environments modeled on communities of practice can effectively integrate technological transformation and human adaptability.

## **Human-Centered Communication and Organizational Adaptation**

In today's rapidly changing business environment, technologically integrated yet human-centered communication is indispensable for corporate success (Kawamata, Tanaka, & Demetrashvili, 2025, forthcoming). Business professionals must cultivate interdisciplinary and intercultural communicative abilities grounded in technological literacy to function effectively within agile and interconnected organizations. These competencies enable professionals to navigate complex workplace discourses that combine digital, relational, and cross-cultural dimensions.

Between 2022 and 2025, I conducted HRD programs for fifteen corporations across both government and private sectors in Japan. Participants represented chemical engineering, civil engineering, construction, IT, and administrative departments, encompassing Japan's chemical and construction industries.

Using focus group interviews, I explored participants' perceptions of workplace challenges and adaptive strategies. Approximately 300 employees contributed over four years, providing extensive qualitative data. Their narratives revealed striking workplace diversity, spanning nationality, language, professional specialization, career stage, gender, and generation. The collaborative dynamics observed mirrored communities of practice, where participants learned through shared problem-solving across disciplinary boundaries.

### **Discussion: Parallels Between TCC 2016 and Japanese HRD**

The findings from these HRD initiatives resonate strongly with my earlier TCC 2016 study. In both contexts, participants learned to collaborate across disciplinary and cultural divides. Around 2016, industries were undergoing profound digital transformation, with production systems increasingly connected by information technology. The diversity of stakeholders made communication, empathy, and adaptability essential to team performance.

At TCC 2016, participants worked in multicultural teams to design destination marketing projects, integrating local knowledge and community engagement in Lăpuș Land. They learned to synthesize creative ideas through agile teamwork, developing competencies such as adaptability, empathy, communicative negotiation, and collaborative problem-solving.

These are precisely the competencies Japanese corporations now seek amid Industry 4.0 transformation. My consulting experience confirms that the interdisciplinary collaboration, intercultural empathy, and agile learning cultivated at TCC 2016 are critical for bridging technological change and human adaptability in today's organizations.

The parallels between TCC 2016 and corporate HRD practices suggest that experiential and intercultural learning models provide valuable frameworks for Human Capital Development (HCD). Developing CoP-style environments within organizations can strengthen not only employees' technical and cognitive skills but also their relational and reflective capacities—key elements for innovation and inclusion.

Integrating technological innovation with human-centered learning requires more than digital upskilling; it calls for a cultural shift toward shared learning, empathy, and reflection. By embedding CoP principles in HRD design, organizations can turn technological disruption into a driver of sustainable growth.

## **Conclusion**

Insights from both TCC and corporate HRD programs reveal that Japan's human capital development must balance agility and empathy, innovation and inclusion. By nurturing communities of practice that bridge disciplines, languages, and cultures,

organizations can align individual growth with collective transformation.

Such integration will enable employees to thrive in the era of Industry 5.0, where technological innovation and human well-being coexist as complementary goals.

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# **Creativity Through Interaction and Reflection in the Transilvania**

## **Creative Camp 2023**

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### **Introduction**

Project-based learning (PBL) is now widely used in higher education, particularly in programs that aim to promote intercultural collaboration. In PBL, students are expected not only to acquire knowledge but also to work with others whose linguistic and cultural backgrounds may differ considerably from their own (Novalia et al, 2025). Many previous studies have explored these learning environments, with particular attention to outcomes such as skill development, intercultural competence, and changes in learners' attitudes (Meyer, 2024). However, there has been little discussion of how creativity itself develops during these learning processes. In multilingual and multicultural classroom settings, communication is often incomplete, negotiated, and sometimes uncertain. Ideas do not appear in completed form, rather, they are gradually shaped through everyday interaction. It is through this ongoing process that creativity becomes visible.

The study examines this process through an analysis of collaborative creativity in the Transilvania Creative Camp (TCC) 2023, an international project-based learning program conducted in Romania. TCC 2023 was held in Lăpuș, a historic village in Maramureș County, where participants were invited to develop marketing

strategies aimed at positioning the village as an attractive destination for potential tourists. Working in small teams, participants designed proposals related to creative tourism and regional development grounded in local culture and community life.

This setting offers a valuable opportunity to observe how creative ideas emerge, change, and acquire meaning through everyday interaction, particularly in situations where participants must rely on limited shared language resources. Rather than treating creativity as an internal ability or a clearly defined outcome, this study approaches creativity as something participants gradually come to understand through participation, communication, and reflection. From this perspective, creativity is not best understood as a personal trait or cognitive ability, but as a socially organized process that unfolds through interaction in specific institutional and cultural contexts.

The aim of this study is to investigate how collaborative creativity develops through interaction in this intercultural PBL environment, with particular attention to changes in participants' perceptions, orientations, and forms of participation over time.

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. How does creativity take shape through interaction and participation in an intercultural project-based learning environment?
2. How do participants gradually come to see and understand their own actions as creative through reflection and alignment with the goals and expectations of the program?

By addressing these questions, this study contributes to research in applied linguistics and intercultural communication by highlighting creativity as an interactional, linguistically mediated, and socially situated phenomenon.

## **Theoretical Background**

This study examines creativity in an intercultural PBL context, with a focus on how creative practices develop through interaction and participation, rather than on individual originality or exceptional achievement. This perspective highlights the collective and social nature of creativity in educational settings. To clarify the scope and analytical focus of the study, this section presents a concise theoretical framework that brings together three key perspectives: levels of creativity, dialogic interaction, and institutional context.

To define the type of creativity explored in this study, Moran's (2010) framework of creativity levels provides a useful starting point. Moran identifies three levels of creativity. Little c creativity refers to everyday personal expression, while Big C creativity involves socially recognized achievements that have historical or cultural impact. Between these two is Middle c creativity, which focuses on creativity at the level of groups, communities, and collaborative activities.

This study adopts the concept of Middle c creativity because it is especially suitable for educational and PBL contexts. In such settings, creativity is not judged mainly by individual originality, but by how well ideas support shared goals, group processes, and the needs of the situation. Middle c creativity allows creativity to be understood as a group-level practice that develops through interaction, negotiation, and mutual recognition among participants.

### **Creativity as Dialogic and Distributed Practice**

Creativity in collaborative learning environments is increasingly understood as a dialogic and distributed process, rather than as an individual mental ability. From this viewpoint, creative ideas do not appear in isolation. Instead, they are formed through interaction, shared attention, and engagement with others. Sawyer (2012)

argues that creativity in group settings is distributed across participants and develops through moment-to-moment interaction. In intercultural PBL contexts, participants depend on dialogue to negotiate meaning, coordinate actions, and build shared understanding. Creativity emerges through incomplete utterances, repetition, embodied responses, and shared interpretation. These interactional processes allow participants to co-construct ideas that make sense within the local context of the project.

### **Linguistic Creativity and Meaning Making**

In applied linguistics, creativity has also been examined as part of everyday language use. Carter (2016) emphasizes that creativity often appears through the flexible and adaptive use of language in ordinary communication. From this perspective, creativity is not limited to unusual or artistic language but is seen when speakers use the language resources they have to achieve their communicative goals. In multilingual and intercultural settings, participants often rely on simplified or non-standard language forms. Rather than causing communication problems, these forms can serve as creative resources that support meaning making and collaboration. Linguistic creativity, in this sense, involves adjusting language to fit the context, the audience, and the purpose of communication.

While dialogic and linguistic perspectives highlight the importance of interaction, creativity in educational projects is also shaped by institutional context. Handford and Koester (2024) argue that creative practices are not only interactional, but also institutionally situated. For creative contributions to be recognized as meaningful, they must fit with organizational goals, norms, and expectations. In PBL programs, creativity is therefore evaluated not only by originality, but also by how relevant and appropriate it is within the institutional framework. Participants' actions gain creative value when they contribute to shared objectives and accepted practices.

This view emphasizes the role of institutional orientation in shaping how creativity emerges, is assessed, and is sustained over time.

These perspectives provide a focused framework for examining creativity in the TCC 2023. By understanding creativity as a middle-level, dialogic, linguistically mediated, and institutionally situated practice, this study can analyze how creative action develops through interaction, participation, and reflection in an intercultural PBL environment.

### **Methodology and data collection**

The participants in this study were members of TCC 2023. They came from different national and academic backgrounds and worked together in small project teams throughout the program. These cases were selected because they represent different forms of participation and different stages of the creative process. They make it possible to compare how creativity emerges, how it is shaped through language use, and how it becomes recognized within the institutional setting. Focusing on multiple cases allows for deeper analysis while avoiding reliance on a single example. These cases were selected because they represent different forms of participation and different moments in the creative process. Together, they allow for a comparative examination of how creativity emerges, is shaped through language use, and becomes institutionally validated. The selection of multiple cases supports analytical depth while avoiding reliance on a single illustrative example.

### **Rationale for a qualitative and ethnographic approach**

This study adopts an ethnographically informed qualitative approach (Henze & Davis, 1998). Following Henze and Davis (1998), communication is understood as a cultural practice that must be examined within its social, historical, and institutional context. This approach focuses on how meaning, participation, and creativity develop through interaction over time.

A qualitative approach is important for understanding participation and creativity in TCC 2023 because the main phenomena examined in this study cannot be fully captured through predefined variables or outcome-based measures. In TCC, creativity is not a fixed attribute or a final product; it develops gradually through ongoing interaction among participants.

Creative moments often appear in tentative talk, hesitation, reformulation, or even silence. These interactional features play an important role in the development of ideas, yet they are difficult to identify or measure using quantitative methods. For this reason, understanding creativity in TCC requires close attention to how participants communicate, respond to one another, and negotiate meaning in real time.

In addition, meanings in TCC are not stable or uniform. In TCC, a creative idea, an appropriate contribution, and a successful outcome are negotiated moment by moment through interaction. These meanings change depending on participants' roles, relationships, and the institutional context of the project. These dynamic and context-dependent processes require an approach that emphasizes careful description, interpretation, and sensitivity to local perspectives.

Participants' understanding of their experiences also develops over time. Changes in perception and attitude may not be immediately visible during the project itself but may emerge later through reflection. Capturing these delayed interpretations therefore requires qualitative data collected at different time points, including retrospective interviews.

### **Methodological orientation**

This study is based on an ethnographic perspective on language and interaction, drawing on Henze and Davis's (1998) work on applying ethnography to cross-cultural pragmatics. Their framework views social reality as multiple, constructed,

and closely connected to participants' lived experiences. Understanding communication therefore requires attention to how people themselves interpret and experience their social world.

In line with this orientation, the present study treats interactional practices within the group as the main focus of analysis. Creativity is examined as a process that develops through ongoing interaction and is shaped by social norms, institutional expectations, and participants' shared activities. Creativity is not treated as an individual mental ability, but as something that emerges through participation in social practice.

Qualitative data were collected using several methods, including recordings of on-site meetings, semi-structured interviews, and field notes. Interactional data were collected during the TCC program from September 1 to September 7, 2023. These recordings captured naturally occurring communication during project discussions, planning sessions, and informal conversations. Semi-structured interviews were conducted between October 2023 and October 2024, after participants had returned to their home countries. This extended period of data collection made it possible to examine how participants' understanding of their experiences developed over time.

The combination of interactional data and retrospective interviews followed Henze and Davis's (1998) emphasis on triangulation and prolonged engagement. Using multiple data sources made it possible to examine both observable interaction and participants' own interpretations of their actions and experiences.

Ethical considerations were addressed at all stages of the study. The purpose and procedures of the research were explained to all participants, and written consent was obtained for both recordings and interviews. All data were anonymized and stored securely. The data were used only for the present study and will be destroyed

after the completion of the research. Trustworthiness was supported through prolonged engagement, the use of multiple data sources, and reflexive attention to the researcher's role in the research process. The study therefore aims for credibility by making analytical procedures clear and grounding interpretations in detailed empirical evidence.

## **Analysis**

This section examines how creativity begins to develop during the early stages of project work in TCC, with particular attention to how participants' interaction is shaped by institutional expectations. The analysis shows that creativity in TCC does not appear as a sudden moment of inspiration. Instead, it develops through small contributions that gradually become recognizable as relevant and appropriate within the project framework.

Excerpt 1 presents an early project discussion in which participants negotiate both how the project should be organized and what content they should focus on. At the beginning of the interaction, their attention is mainly directed toward shared tools and materials. As the discussion continues, however, their focus shifts toward selecting concrete ideas related to gastronomy. This shift marks an important moment in the creative process, as participants begin to move from procedural coordination toward the exploration of possible project content.

<p><b>EXCERPT 1.</b> Early idea proposal with uncertain</p>	<p><b>EXCERPT 2.</b> Orienting to audience and platform norms</p>
	
<p>Shelly: But based on yesterday, what would you like, both gastronomy? Akari: ... (looks at Shelly and smiles) Shelly: Popcorns?? Akari: (laughing) Yeah. Shelly: For me, I'm interesting homemade. Akari: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah! I have... I have... this video.</p>	<p>Shelly: We're supposed to choose one. Tom: One for Instagram and one for Facebook. Shelly: Yeah, we could use the same photo. It's good to have a different text. Context. Don't just copy-paste.</p>
<p>(Team A, Recording Data 8, 00:35, 2023/09/03)</p>	<p>(Team A, Recording Data 11, 00:30–01:58, 2023.09.03)</p>

The proposal of “popcorn” is introduced in a tentative and humorous manner rather than as a firm or fully developed suggestion. Akari’s initial silence, followed by smiling and laughter, functions as interactional alignment rather than explicit evaluation. Through the participants’ shared orientation to what may count as a workable and relevant idea within the TCC context, the suggestion gains legitimacy through mutual alignment and uptake, rather than through direct endorsement.

While Excerpt 1 illustrates how creativity begins to emerge through interaction in project discussions, the next stage of the creative process involves making these emerging ideas visible and shareable.

For this reason, Case 2 focuses on how creativity becomes linguistically expressed in the production of user-generated content (UGC). In this phase, participants were required to select images and add short texts designed for social media platforms. These tasks encouraged the use of concise and context-sensitive language. Here, participants clearly orient to platform-specific practices and audience expectations. Their discussion does not focus on linguistic correctness but on how meaning should be shaped for different communicative situations. From this perspective, creativity is expressed not only through new ideas, but also through participants' ability to adapt language to audience, platform, and institutional expectations.

Akari's reflection further shows that creativity does not emerge as a clearly defined intention at the beginning of the project. Instead, it develops as a response to lived experience and becomes meaningful through later reflection. For Akari, the act of recording videos gained significance only after participation, when she began to understand her role as someone who could communicate the value of the place to others.

*li imeeji ni natta. Mura ni itte mo shizen shika nakute tokuni nanimo nanmo nai no kana tte omotta kedo, jissai Maramureshu ittara hito mo meccha yokatta shi shokuji mo oishikatta shi, dentō bunka mo atta shi, soko ni ikanai to wakaranai miryoku ga ippai atta kara. Nanka iku mae made wa mura tte nanimo nai toka na no kana toka, tada ie ga atte mitaina kanji kana tte omotta kedo, itte miru to sō yatte miryoku ga ippai aru kara tanoshikatta. li imeeji ima wa. Watashi mo Ajiajin de hajimete Maramureshu ni itte sono, nanka jissai ni jibun ga itte dōga totte, kitai to omotte moraeru yō ni, dōga totte ita kana, watashi ya Nihon ni itara, keiken*

*dekinai yō na tokoro o kekkō bideo de osaete wa ita kana. Iku made wa, anma rikai dekinakatta kara, iku made wa mokuteki ishiki ga nakatta, itte kara, tashika ni tsutaete mitaina tte iu omoi wa mebaeta.*

[Before visiting the village, I thought there might be nothing there except nature and houses. However, when I actually went to Marmureş, my impression completely changed. The people were very kind, the food was delicious, and there was a strong sense of traditional culture. I realized that there were many attractions that I could only understand by being there. At first, I did not really have a clear purpose. I did not fully understand the place before visiting it. However, after going there, I started to feel that I wanted to communicate these experiences to others. As an Asian person visiting Marmureş for the first time, I tried to capture moments through videos so that people might want to visit the place. These were experiences that I could not have had if I had stayed in Japan.]

(Akari, Interview, 2024.10.30)

Akari's reflection offers important insight into how creativity in TCC develops over time. Creativity does not appear as a clear intention from the beginning. Instead, it emerges as a gradual shift in understanding that becomes visible mainly through later reflection. This temporal dimension shows that creative action in intercultural PBL is not always experienced as "creative" at the moment it occurs.

During the project, Akari recorded videos without a strong sense of purpose. Through participation and later reflection, however, these actions were reinterpreted as meaningful efforts to communicate the value of the place to others. This process demonstrates that creativity is not limited to the moment of production but develops as participants interpret their own actions over time. Akari's actions gained creative value when they became aligned with the broader

goals of TCC, such as representing local culture and encouraging interest in rural communities. In this sense, creativity is not inherent in the act of recording videos itself. It emerges when participants come to recognize their actions as relevant and appropriate within the institutional framework.

This analysis also challenges views of creativity that emphasize visible initiative or verbal leadership. Akari's creativity was not expressed through frequent idea proposals or explicit leadership. Instead, it appeared through embodied engagement, careful observation, and retrospective meaning-making. Such forms of creativity may remain invisible in outcome-focused evaluations, yet they play an important role in sustaining collaborative and institutional practices.

Akari's reflection demonstrates that creativity in TCC is closely connected to participation, experience, and later interpretation. Creativity emerges through doing, but it is understood through reflection. This finding highlights the importance of qualitative approaches that attend to participants' voices and their temporal perspectives when examining creativity in intercultural educational contexts.

## **Discussion**

This study conceptualizes creativity in intercultural project-based learning not as an individual ability or fixed outcome, but as an interactional, linguistically mediated, and institutionally situated practice that develops through participation over time.

The analysis shows that creativity in TCC unfolds as a process rather than a single moment of idea generation. Creativity emerges through interactional alignment in early project discussions, where participants negotiate ideas in relation to shared tools, procedures, and institutional expectations. Creative contributions gain relevance not through originality alone but through their recognizability within the project framework. Participants also adapt limited linguistic resources to meet audience and platform-specific expectations, demonstrating that creativity can be

realized through everyday language use rather than complex or highly novel forms. Akari's retrospective account further shows that creative action is not always experienced as intentional during participation. Creativity becomes visible through reflection, when past actions are reinterpreted as meaningful contributions aligned with the goals of TCC. This suggests that creativity in intercultural learning contexts often becomes recognizable only after participation, emphasizing the importance of reflective data in qualitative research.

Several limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. Due to space constraints, the analysis focuses on a limited number of excerpts and primarily on one focal participant. While these excerpts were selected for their analytical relevance, they do not represent the full range of interactional diversity within TCC. Future research could expand the dataset to include more participants and interactional episodes, enabling comparative analysis across roles, linguistic backgrounds, and phases of participation.

Further studies could also examine how creative practices developed in TCC continue beyond the program itself, including how participants transfer their experiences to other educational or professional contexts. Longitudinal designs and multimodal analysis would be particularly useful for capturing the sustained and evolving nature of creativity in intercultural project-based learning.

Despite these limitations, this study provides a focused qualitative account of how creativity is enacted, recognized, and legitimated in an intercultural educational setting. Creativity in TCC is not simply something participants possess. It is something they come to understand through participation, language use, and reflection within an institutional framework over time.

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## One Month in Groșii Țibleșului: A Summer to Always Remember

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This chapter was initially prepared as a tourist information booklet by two Italian students from the University of Turin: Anna Sofia Monticelli, a student of Intercultural Communication, and Lorenzo Bottino, a postgraduate student in Sociology. The implementation of this project was made possible thanks to the supervision of Professor Florin Nechita from the Transilvania University of Brașov, as part of a European rural mobility initiative.



The project we were part of aims to promote knowledge and understanding of European rural realities by sending students to different communities to study the social and cultural tissue. Our stay in Groșii Țibleșului lasted a month, during which we had the opportunity to immerse ourselves in village life, getting to know local

people, their life expectations and discovering their traditions. This experience allowed us to catch a small glimpse of the cross-section of rural life in Romania, which we now want to share with you through this chapter.

## **Geography**

Grosii Țibleșului is a charming village located in the picturesque Maramureș region, more specifically in the land of Lăpuș. It is 800 meters above sea level and set between the majestic peaks of the volcanic Țibleș Mountains and the green hills of Gruimanu and Plaiul Moroșenilor. This typical mountain village, known for its traditional shingle-covered wooden houses, offers visitors an authentic taste of rural Romanian life.

Easily accessible from Târgu Lăpuș, just 22 kilometers away, the village is an ideal access point for exploring the natural beauty and rich cultural traditions of the legendary land of Lăpuș. With its stunning scenery and genuine hospitality, Grosii Țibleșului is a must-visit destination for those who want a diving experience in the heart of rural Romania. Characterized by its hills and mountain slopes covered with extensive fir and beech forests, they are rich in vegetation, including blueberries, junipers and colorful wildflowers; alpine pastures also add a touch of natural beauty.

The local wildlife is equally fascinating. The forests are home to bears, deer, wolves and foxes, while the clear waters of the streams are populated by trout, making the area ideal for fishing enthusiasts. Birdwatchers can spot birds of prey in flight and a variety of smaller birds. Grosii Țibleșului is a perfect place to immerse yourself in unspoiled nature and discover the wealth of local wildlife.

## **History**

The first mention of the village dates back in an historical document in 1594 under the name “Teokeős”. Over the centuries, the village took on various names,

reflecting the cultural and political influences of the time, particularly the Hungarian one. During Hungarian rule, Transylvania saw a significant penetration of feudal legal relations, which led to greater documentation of settlements, including those of Groșii Țibleșului, also known as “Tökés” in 17th- and 18th-century documents.

This Hungarian influence contributed not only to the naming of the village, but also to its economic and social development, introducing new administrative and cultural patterns. Despite late documentary records, probably due to the loss of documents during periods of instability, the village maintained its patriarchal traditions, enriched by interaction with neighboring cultures. Today, Groșii Țibleșului preserves traces of this complex history, offering visitors a unique opportunity to explore cultural heritage that blends Romanian and Hungarian influences.

## **Occupations**

### **Lumber**

The traditional occupations of Groșii Țibleșului are deeply rooted in animal husbandry and forest work, activities that have defined the unbreakable bond between the inhabitants and the mountains. The Groșeni have been able to take advantage of natural resources, demonstrating remarkable skill in the management and exploitation of wood, which has long been the main material for the construction of houses, domestic outbuildings and tools necessary for daily life.

We also got a small taste of what it means to “go wood”, an activity that, although it may seem simple, requires strength, stamina and a deep knowledge of the land. The phrase “go to the mountains” or “go to Țibleș” does not just represent a physical action, but embodies an entire culture, a way of life closely linked to the surrounding nature.

Today, however, things are changing. Brick houses are slowly replacing traditional wooden ones, symbolizing the new opportunities offered by electrification and money remitted by those who emigrated but also funds by the European Union. This change not



only marks an evolution in the village's urban landscape, but also reflects an opening to new economic prospects, while keeping alive the historical connection to the former occupations.



## **Agriculture**

The history of Groșii Țibleșului reveals that agriculture has long been the backbone of the local economy, with practices dating back centuries. The area's favorable pedoclimatic conditions have allowed the cultivation of field crops such as wheat, corn, and potatoes. Livestock farming, particularly cattle and sheep breeding, has further expanded the use of pastureland, making it a significant aspect of village life.

In Groșii Țibleșului, nearly every villager, especially those who reside here permanently, is involved in farming. The community collectively cultivates an impressive 3,567 hectares of arable land. Beyond the fields, private gardens flourish with a variety of vegetables, including cabbage, beans, peas, tomatoes, carrots, and celery.



One striking aspect of life here is the prevalence of self-sufficiency. Almost every household has its own garden, and it's rare to find many fruits or vegetables in the local grocery store, as most people grow their own produce. The emphasis on organic farming is strong, with a clear preference for homegrown foods over industrial products.

During our time here, we had the opportunity to taste the local products and the difference in flavor compared to city-bought goods is definitely remarkable. The fruits and vegetables here have a freshness and taste very different from what we were used to, and we can say that it truly is a testament to the rich agricultural traditions that continue in Groșii Țibleșului.

## Animal Farming

Animal farming is one of the main activities and a key source of livelihood for the people of Groșii Țibleșului. Thanks to the natural resources offered by the relief of the area, the raising of sheep, cows, horses and pigs is widely practiced. The rich pastures surrounding the village provide abundant food for the livestock during spring, summer, and fall, while the hay harvested becomes the essential reserve for the winter.



Animal farming, in particular, is a well-established tradition in the surrounding hills and mountains, where each family knows its terrain but also the breeds of animals which are best suited to the land. Among the animals raised, a prominent role is played by buffaloes and cows, valued not only for the quality and quantity of milk produced, ideal for making cheese, but also for their resistance to disease and ability to adapt to different environmental conditions. Thanks to the sale of products derived from livestock farming, many inhabitants manage to secure sufficient income for their daily livelihood.

In addition to cattle and sheep, the Groșeni also raise horses, which are essential for farm work, transporting agricultural products and timber, and other activities that require animal traction.



An iconic example of rural life here is Ionel, a 65-year-old man born and raised in Groșii Tibleșului. He has spent much of his life working with animals, particularly sheeps and lambs, and could not imagine a life without them. After a period abroad, Ionel returned to his hometown, where he built a small farm above the village. Here, he lives a peaceful life, devoting himself to caring for his animals and making cheese, an art he has passionately cultivated. His days begin at sunrise, with milking the cows, making cheese, caring for the animals and his garden.

Ionel also has a small herd of goats and is building a small dairy to produce cheese in a perfectly manicured environment. Despite the challenges, he finds peace and satisfaction in talking to his animals and keeping alive a tradition that reflects the very soul of Groșii Tibleșului.

In Groșii Tibleșului, apiculture is a traditional activity that continues to thrive, with Latin terms reflecting its historical roots. Hunting and fishing are ancient practices in the local forests and rivers, where animals such as Carpathian bear and trout are found. Berry picking is also important: strawberries, raspberries and blueberries are made into jams and syrups, while medicinal herbs gathered in the forests are used for home remedies.

During our experience in Groșii Țibleșului, we discovered that although the village may appear quiet and life seems to flow slowly from the outside (as is amplified by the narrative about it on social media), in reality the daily routine is intense and busy. There is never a shortage of work around the house: from taking care of the vegetable garden and animals to maintaining the yard, there is always something to do. A local lady made us think about this by stating that life here „is not monotonous,” whereas the city life, with its tight and relentless rhythms, is. This dynamic pace is especially true for those who make their living from farming and ranching, although it obviously does not apply to those who work in companies in nearby towns or in the construction industry.

### **Religion**

The majority of the population in Groșii Țibleșului is of Orthodox Christian faith. However, during the Hungarian administration in the 15th and 16th centuries, the Orthodox religion was subjected to persecution so this led to a collective conversion to the Romanian Greek-Catholic Church. This church maintained the authority of the Pope in Rome but permitted services in Romanian and also used the Byzantine rite, commonly used in Orthodox practices. Though this was seen as a compromise, most people became Greek-Catholic just because of the political climate back then. So when they could express their faith freely, most of them returned to the Orthodox Church. This was in 1948.

### **The Church**

The beautiful local Orthodox church is a really important gathering place. It was built in 1889 on the main road of Groșii Țibleșului. Restoration works, executed from 1995 to 1999, consisted in the renovation and repair of inside paintings; the construction of a balcony, and the crafting of an iconostasis from oak wood by Coroiu Gheorghe, a sculptor from the village. Also in this period, a new parish house was built. In 2009 the parish had 1,954 Orthodox believers and five cemeteries.

## Priesthood

Father Ioan Bumbu was the Orthodox priest of the village from 1949 until 1991.

In 1954, during his activity, the church was again consecrated, and new church bells were mounted. In the period he served here, he built a memorial dedicated to the fallen heroes from the two Wars. This was with the support and involvement of parishioners. Today it is placed in the local camin cultural's garden, which is right opposite the church. Father Bumbu also initiated an annual pilgrimage to the Monastery of Saint Anne in Rohia, on the Feast of the Dormition of the Virgin Mary. This is an event where all the men and women in the village come together to cook and, therefore, continue a cherished tradition of community life. This year we had the pleasure to see it with our own eyes and it truly was special.

In 1992 he retired: Father Ioan Ropan-Lungu has been the priest in the village since then. We attended two of his masses to then find out that he retired on August 6, the day of Schimbarea la Față, transferring his leadership role in the village to the new priest, Daniel Dascălu.



## **The Religious Celebrations We Attended**

### **Sărbătoarea Sfântului Ilie (July 19th-20th)**

On this day the Orthodox Church celebrates Sfântul Ilie (Saint Elijah), who is regarded as the wonder-worker who brings rain upon the earth but also the protector of aviators.

The festivities started on Friday, July 19th with the Vespers of the Holy Prophet Elijah in Plesca Țibleșului. The villagers went up the hill to the summer altar to take part in the vespers: this year was especially unique because we were visited by Arhimandrit Timotei Bel—one of the most revered among the faithful. For the occasion, there also was a copy of the respected icon of the Madonna of Pantanassa, particularly renowned for miraculous healing from cancer. The icon was then venerated by the people that were present there, bringing hope and comfort.

The Holy Liturgy was celebrated the next morning, July 20, followed by a memorial to the heroes of the fatherland. This all took place at the top of Țibleș Peak, 1839 meters high, where Lăpuș, Maramureș, and Năsăud areas meet.

At the top, there is the Țibleș cross, a stone monument, built and consecrated in 2014 using 17 helicopter transports. It was erected in commemoration of those who took refuge in the mountains during the communist regime. The cross is placed in a wooden arch, worked in the style of Maramureș gates and crowned by a bell that sings to you through the mountains.

This *sărbătoare* has been celebrated here since 2014. Amidst the beauty of nature, in a peaceful and spiritual atmosphere, hundreds of persons gathered together to pray during the holy liturgy. Immediately after, there was something to eat and drink to get ready for the descent. Going back to Groșii, there was a fraternal agape at Cabana Poiana Țapului: our dwelling and eating together closed out this perfect and full day.

## Schimbarea la Față (August 6th)



The Transfiguration of Jesus Christ is a feast for celebration in both the Orthodox and the Catholic Church to commemorate one of the many miracles accomplished by Christ. On Mount Tabor, he showed himself before his apostles Peter, James, and

John in all his divine splendor, shining like light. Before this, having seen his other miracles, the apostles took him for a great prophet—the Messiah. This event, however, made them realize that he was not only a man of God but true God.

This important event took place in the last year of Jesus' life on earth and a few months before his passion and resurrection on Golgotha. The evangelist Matthew reports that Christ's face shone “like the sun”, whereas Luke said that his garments were “like snow”, in order to underline that his human nature was not absorbed into the divine nature so that they are unmixed, unchanged, and indivisible: a very important theological point accentuated at the liturgy.

In this divine light, there appeared Moses and Elijah, speaking to Jesus about his destiny to give his life for the salvation of humankind. This is a feast so esteemed by the believers of Orthodoxy that this year, here in Groșii Țibleșului, it was celebrated with a holy liturgy done by a great archbishop. Accompanying the archbishop in the service were the retiring parish priest, Ioan Ropan-Lungu, and his successor Daniel Dascălu.

After the liturgy, a convivial moment took place at the cabana, where the community gathered to eat. Although the day of August 6 is in the period of fasting dedicated in the liturgical year to the Dormition of the Mother of God, the Church

grants permissions for fish, wine, and oil. For fish merchants and seafood, this is still the best business day of the year.

### **Adormirea Maicii Domnului (August 15th)**

The Dormition of the Mother of God falls on August 15th and it commemorates the peaceful death of the Virgin Mary. The word “Dormition” means both falling asleep and dying; in reference to the gentle ways of the Virgin Mary's death, first falling into a deep sleep and then being admitted into Heaven, body and soul, by God to celebrate her humanity as a mortal. This feast reveals a life that is to come, and as such it is said that the Mother of God “fell asleep”. The dormition is the most important Marian feast in the Byzantine rite, and its period of fasting precedes from August 1st to 15th.

For this occasion, the village along with many other villages gathered together to the Monastery of Rohia: the prayers started the 14th in the afternoon and continued until 1 am. There was a break and then other prayers started from 3 a.m. in the morning until the time of the mess. The monastery was filled with people everywhere.



After the mess, there was a convivial *pomană* with *ciorbă* of sheep meat and *mălai* bread. It

was delicious, especially because it was cooked by Groșeni! Every year the people of Groșii prepare the meal for the Dormition and, considering it was also our last day there, we were delighted to meet everyone from the community and to properly thank them and say goodbye.

## The Roman Catholic Church

The church of the Roman Catholic Parish in Groșii Țibleșului was built in 1902. It was made of stone and plastered of tin, then renewed and extended in 1910 but also renovated on the inside in the 1950s and on the outside in 2007. Inside there are a series of paintings displaying the Via Crucis.



Around 20-25% of the population of Groșii is Catholic. At present, the services of the Roman Catholic cult are performed by a priest from Târgu Lăpuș. Also, a singularity that can be observed from the moment of entering the church is that the Gospels are all written in Hungarian. The cemetery is found a short distance behind the church, on a small hill.

## Community and investments

During this month-long experience, we had the opportunity to closely observe the vitality and commitment of the Groșii Țibleșului community. At first look, this place might seem isolated and quiet, but in reality it hides a treasure box of internal dynamics, knowledge, and strong humanity.

Thanks to the efforts of Mayor Nicolaie Burzo, in office since 2008, and his staff, since 2009 a large amount of funds from the European Union have been invested through the “Plan de Dezvoltare Rurală”. These investments have led to significant infrastructural improvements, such as the cleaning and upgrading of the Bradu River, the installation of a water channelization system, and the completion of electrification in almost all homes.

But the transformations did not stop there. The mayor has also initiated projects that have strengthened the social and cultural texture of the village. These include the construction of a center for the elderly, where residents can meet and participate in communal activities, and the renovation of the *cămin cultural*, the neighborhood house, which now serves as an auditorium for the local school and a gathering place for the



community. Located in front of the church, the *cămin cultural* is also where people gather to share meals and moments of remembrance of the deceased.

This redevelopment plan has shown that in addition to practical interventions, attention to social cohesion and the enhancement of cultural traditions can make a difference in the daily life of a village.

In addition to traditional activities that keep local culture and customs alive, youth life in the village of Groșii Țibleșului is also vibrant and lively. The construction of a communal park and a modern sports hall has given new energy to the community, making it a hub for multiple activities. The sports hall, in particular, is not only a venue for events and official matches, but every Sunday it turns into a lively meeting place where volleyball matches are played involving people of all ages, from the youngest to the elderly. It is really exciting to see how these public spaces manage to strengthen the social network, creating opportunities for recreation and gathering that meet the needs of all generations. The soccer fields, which are always well maintained, and the village pub are equally important, continuing to be enthusiastically attended and helping to keep sociality alive in the village.



A particularly significant event for the community is the market held on the last Saturday of each month. This event is not only an opportunity to shop, but represents a real social gathering, a time when the town comes alive and the community is strengthened. For us, it was at the market, about 20 days after our arrival, that we had a really tangible experience of the cohesion that characterizes Groșii Țibleșului. On that morning, we realized how connected the community was: everyone knew and greeted each other warmly, and even though we were strangers, we found ourselves doing the same, discovering how welcoming and inclusive this small reality is. The market is not just a place of commerce, but a symbol of the vitality and social interaction that makes this village special.

The mayor, Nicolaie Burzo, has played a key role in revitalizing village life. Since becoming mayor, he has worked tirelessly to improve the infrastructure and living conditions in Groșii Țibleșului.

Thanks to his efforts and access to European Union funds, he has managed to implement projects that have given new life to the village. Despite the apparent tranquility that may seem synonymous with isolation, Groșii Țibleșului is a vibrant place full of potential, with a promising future. The mayor often emphasizes how there is more life in the village today than in the past, thanks not only to permanent residents, but also to those who, while living elsewhere during the week, choose to spend their weekends here, to relax and breathe clean air in their secondary

dwellings, in cabins surrounded by nature, or in the Schillacy pension, the first open lodging place in the village; bringing out their attachment to their place of origin. This phenomenon not only enriched community life but also brought a new energy, making Groșii Țibleșului a place where past and present blend harmoniously.

An important symbol of the link with the past is the traditional house museum, built in 2015, which reflects the desire to preserve traditions that are slowly disappearing. Various activities take place here, especially during the festive season. On December 6, residents dressed in traditional attire gather to sing carols, prepare hot wine, and celebrate a traditional pre-Christmas pig slaughter in accordance with ancient customs.



Groșii Țibleșului is a village that, thanks to recent initiatives and the energy of its community, has transformed into a hub of active participation. From sports facilities to monthly markets, every space and event strengthens the bonds between residents, creating a welcoming and vibrant environment.

This vitality not only enriches local life but also opens up new perspectives for the future, proving that, despite challenges, the community remains the beating heart of the village. And let's not forget the delightful tradition of older folks sitting on their porches, watching passersby with a keen eye—because in Groșii, people-watching is practically a sport in itself!

## Food and drinks

The culinary culture of Groșii Țibleșului goes beyond mere nutrition, representing a true symbol of community and attachment to local raw materials, as well as being a tangible expression of hospitality.

During this month-long stay, we had the opportunity to taste numerous typical dishes, which will be listed below.

One significant aspect we noticed is the widespread habit among the people with whom we established ties of eating “de post” on Wednesdays and Fridays, that is avoiding dairy products and meat, thus embracing a vegan diet. As specified earlier, fasting is observed at different times of the year, such as the seven weeks before Easter and the six weeks before Christmas.

**Sarmale**, a traditional and beloved dish in Groșii Țibleșului, is the emblem of local



cuisine, capable of transforming simple ingredients into a celebration of flavors. To prepare these cabbage rolls, you start with a base of ground meat, usually a mixture of pork and beef, which is mixed with uncooked rice, finely chopped onion and a mix of aromatic spices: sweet paprika, black pepper and cumin.

The heart of the preparation involves stuffing the fermented cabbage leaves with this rich and flavorful mixture. Each leaf is delicately wrapped around the filling and carefully rolled. The rolls are then arranged neatly in a large pot, alternating with slices of smoked bacon and bay leaves, which infuse an additional layer of flavor.

The next step is slow, patient cooking: the sarmales are covered with a rich meat stock and left to simmer on low heat for several hours. During this long cooking time, the cabbage becomes tender and the filling melds into a delicious balance of flavors. It is usually served warm with a spoon of sour cream. For the fasting period, mushrooms replace meat.

**Ardei Umpluti** are also a typical dish we had the chance to try, they do not differ too much from Sarmale, they have the same procedure but the outside shell is different: instead of the cabbage leaf, it uses a bell pepper.

In Groșii Țibleșului, **ciorba** is more than just a soup: it is a dish that reflects the richness and tradition of the local cuisine. There are two main variations we enjoyed, each with its own history and character.

Ciorba de legume, a light vegetable soup, is a perfect choice for fasting periods. Prepared with a base of stir-fried onion, carrots and celery, it is enriched with fresh vegetables such as potatoes, zucchini and green beans. This is cooked in a vegetable broth until a flavorful and nutritious consistency is achieved. Finally, it is flavored with fresh herbs such as dill and parsley, and served as a first course.

On the other hand, ciorba de oaie offers a more robust substance. This sheep meat soup is prepared by cooking the meat with onion, carrots, and celery, creating a rich and flavorful broth. Adding potatoes, peppers and tomatoes, and flavoring with herbs such as estragon and thyme, the result is a rich and flavorful dish that expresses the gastronomic tradition of Groșii Țibleșului.

Both versions of the ciorba offer an authentic taste of Groșii cuisine, showing how food can unite and reflect the culture and daily life of the village.



**MĂalai**, or corn bread, is a symbol of authenticity in the cuisine of Groșii Țibleșului. Prepared with yellow cornmeal, this rustic bread is the result of a peasant tradition that enhances local resources.

The process of preparing mĂalai begins with the selection of cornmeal, often finely ground to obtain a soft texture. The flour is then mixed with water, yeast and a pinch of salt, creating a thick, slightly grainy dough. After letting the dough rest to allow the yeast to act, the malai is baked slowly in the oven, developing a golden, crispy crust, while the inside remains moist and slightly sweet.

Malai is a robust bread with a rich, rustic flavor that goes well with traditional dishes such as sarmale, meat stews, and fresh cheeses. It is often served on the table during main meals, simply and tastefully accompanying each course. We had the chance to try it in a “pomana”. This event is a living reminder of the deceased, carried by a shared meal from a big part of the community of the village. It is usually organized in the camin cultural after the liturgy in the church.

**Plăcinte** are an authentic expression of the traditional cuisine, found on local tables in both savory and sweet versions. These dough pies are a symbolic dish that encapsulates simple and genuine flavors, prepared with local ingredients.

Savory plăcinte are especially popular for their variety of fillings. Plăcinte cu cartofi are stuffed with mashed and well-seasoned potatoes, perfect for a hearty meal. Plăcinte cu varză, on the other hand, encloses a filling of stewed cabbage, with a slightly sweet and aromatic taste. Those two are preferred variances when it's fasting period. In the other times of the year there is no shortage of plăcinte cu brânză și ceapă verde, where fresh cheese is combined with the crunchiness of spring onions, offering an explosion of flavors to the palate.

The sweet versions are no different and offer a must-have comfort food. The plăcintă cu mere, filled with grated and lightly sweetened apples, encapsulates the scent of autumn and the holidays, with a flavor that immediately takes you back to grandmothers' kitchens and evenings spent with the family. We fortunately had the chance to try such a thing during our stay here and our stomach is definitely grateful for that.

Plăcinte are more than just a food: they are a tradition that spans generations, a sign of welcome and sharing. These delicacies, found in every house in Groșii Țibleșului, represent the warmth of the community and the authenticity of village life, uniting past and present in every bite.

In Groșii Țibleșului, sweets have a special place in culinary traditions, bringing a touch of sweetness and comfort to any occasion. Prominent among these are **pancove**-as gogoși-soft fried doughnuts, beloved by young and old alike. These delicacies, golden and sprinkled with sugar, are often prepared in large quantities to be shared with family and friends, creating moments of simple and genuine joy.



Along with pancoves, another must have dessert are **clătite** (some sort of crepes) - and **papanasi**, soft, sweet cheese donuts, usually served with sour cream and berry jam. They are an explosion of flavor and textures that perfectly represent the hospitable character of the local cuisine.

**Cozonac** and cornelute are also not to be missed on feast days. Cozonac is a sweet and fluffy bread, rich in nuts, cocoa, or dried fruits, which is carefully prepared especially during the Christmas and Easter holidays. **Cornulețe**, on the other hand, are small croissants of crumbly dough, filled with jam (we tried the ones with plums one), perfect to accompany an afternoon coffee.

These sweets are not only a treat for the palate, but a symbol of conviviality and tradition, which continues to bind the Groșii Țibleșului community to its roots, bringing sweetness and warmth to every home.

Strong handmade spirits are deeply ingrained in Groșii Tibleșului culture, with *horinca* being the most well-known. Made from locally cultivated fruits such as pears, apples, and plums, this crystal-clear, double-distilled beverage can have an impressive 60% alcohol content. It serves as a powerful reminder of the area's rich history and is frequently used as a welcome sign that invites visitors to partake in the warmth of the neighborhood.

However, residents are proud of much more than just horinca. Additionally, there is *afinată*, which is created from wild blueberries, and *vișinată*, a rich, ruby-red liqueur made from sour cherries. These fruit liqueurs are excellent choices for toasting both large and small milestones in life since they have a strong kick despite being slightly sweeter and less intense than horinca.

Each of these beverages is a testament to the richness of the land and the ability of its inhabitants to elevate it. Whether you're drinking *afinată*, *vișinată*, or *horinca*, you're participating in a custom that emphasizes celebration and community just as much. Though they may be smooth, these drinks are potent enough to make an impression, so pace yourself!



## Folk and Popular Culture

### Popular Dances and Music

The folklore of Groșii Țibleșului can be located within the larger cultural background of Țara Lăpușului and, more widely, Maramureș. However, like every village, Groșii Țibleșului has its own unique and original characteristics.

The songs in the village talk about a variety of themes, with a strong emphasis on the pastoral epic ballads with family chronicles, romantic sagas and stories of outlaws.

The song is predominant in the lyrical genre, being a way of expression of the peasants who would take pleasure and comfort from music and dance.

Oral tradition still recalls a choir that performed between 1935-1938. In any case, Groșii Țibleșului only joined the regional Choirs competition circuit in 1961 with a mixed four-voice choir, that remained active until 1967.

The women of the village tell us memories of their young age in the 1970s and 1980s when every Saturday and Sunday they used to organize the joc, a moment of dance and singing in which everyone took part in.

The joc was a social gathering where young people met up with each other; they also tell us that most of the marriages have originated from those encounters. It was an occasion to dance with the boy you liked, to get to know him better, and to see where that could take you. However, deepening these ties involved the meeting of parents, and even when a couple went out together on one of these social outings, they could not go alone. Rarely did couples meet outside of such village functions until marriage.

During festive periods, such as Easter or Christmas, the joc would continue for three or four days. One woman, laughing, described the joc as their version of a disco, their way to celebrate life together and be carefree.

This type of gatherings no longer occur today, but starting from the idea of it, folk groups have been formed to maintain the tradition of joc.

### **Ansamblul “Doina Țibleșului”**

Thus, in Groșii Țibleșului, the folk ensemble „Doina Țibleșului” has as its main purpose the promoting of the popular culture in traditional dances, songs, and costumes of the valleys from the lower reaches of the Țibleș Mountains.

Founded in 1995, the ensemble attended many festivals and folk contests including international events. They have even performed on Romanian national television and many other programs, and they have toured in Finland and Israel too.



The ensemble's directors, Nicolaie and Aurica Pop, are also the owners of the Schilacy guesthouse that we will talk about in the following chapters.

It was really beautiful to see that the ensemble was composed of people from all ages: starting with children of eight or twelve years old until the elderly.

We had the chance to attend the "Zestrea lăpușană," an event celebrating traditional dances and costumes, in the city of Târgu Lăpuș. While speaking with Livia, the organizer of the event, she underlined how important it is, for them, to keep the traditions alive in order to be able to share their dances and costumes with different people.

Many groups coming from villages in the area took part in the event and we could notice how, from village to village, the costumes' details changed in colors and patterns.

In the case of events being held closer, the group often uses the yellow school minibus.

## **Ansamblul Țibleșul**

Another group, Țibleșul, was formed in 2007, and its members consist of women aged between 32 and 70. Many of the members are also part of the church choir and sing songs telling about the habits, legends, and stories of the village.

One of the most significant representatives of the folk music of Groșii Țibleșului is soloist Pop Onișor, with whom we had the pleasure to talk a little bit. He has been working with Romanian radio and television for many years, won several national festivals and competitions, and is a member of the Doina Țibleșului ensemble. His broad repertoire includes music of the villages of Țara Lăpușului.



## **Traditional Costumes**

What we call today traditional costumes were, in fact, the only clothes worn in Groșii Țibleșului under the communist regime. No clothes came from the outside world, and thus all the traditional clothes were handmade by the women of the village. This knowledge was then passed on to their daughters.

Their creation could be possible because of the access to raw materials: made from growing hemp and flax, rearing sheep, processing the yarn, weaving, they then could do the embroidery.

These costumes are nowadays put on during major religious feasts (such as the vespers on Saint Elijah or Schimbarea la Față) or while attending masses or rosaries during fasting times, such as the fifteen-day fasting period of the Dormition of the Virgin Mary.

The material culture of the region finds expression in the craftsmanship of folk clothing, which features harmoniously colored, plant-based motifs. The differences in folk costumes often indicate age and social status, sometimes distinguished only by color. There is also reliable evidence of the influences coming from the Năsăud region, even if some of the borrowed elements were adapted and modified within their form.

For men, the traditional piece of clothing is a long shirt which ends right above the knee, all embroidered in the same motifs with thread or beads. The “clop” is an eye-catcher: a traditional hat decorated with peacock tails, usually of around 80 feathers. Woolen trousers are still preserved in Groșii Țibleșului, as in all villages of Țara Lăpușului. The wide belt worn is gradually replaced by a more narrow one, similar to those from Năsăud region.



Costume for women consists of two *zadii*, a simple garment made of wool thread prepared in the home. The *Ciupag* is a shirt with a stand-up collar, having sleeves to the elbow; side gussets and two panels under the sleeves are added to close in front and back. Over the *ciupag*, women wear a tucked-in breastplate that ends at the left hand under the arm and also gets to the waist. The bodice is waisted, without sleeves; the neckline and the extremities of the sleeves are filigreed with leather and lamb fur at the bottom. Polychrome motifs are stamped with floral motifs.

## **The Origins of the Village and the Legend of Bud Ioan Cioranul**

Over 415 years ago, around 1594, a man from the historical region of Maramureș embarked on a hunting expedition. His hunt for a deer led him deeper into the thick forests of Mount Țibleș. This region was known for its thick woods—full of tall elms and beeches. The man, mesmerized by the beauty and richness of the forest, was struck with a deep desire to build a home in this untouched wilderness.

Twelve years later his dream came true: he built a house from the trunk of a huge tree, marking the beginning of the village's history. His name was Bud Ioan, later known as Cioranul. Bud Ioan Cioranul was not only known for his strength, courage, and hardworking nature; he also had a reputation as an outlaw.

The nickname “Cioran” derived from the Romanian word cioară, meaning “crow”, and was attached to the strangest incident in his life. At that time, the emperor had ordered the establishment of frontier regiments and was recruiting the most able and hard-working men, to then reward them with land and title. Bud Ioan had entered one of those regiments, in which he had served for 12 years, building close relationships with his comrades, the frontier guards. He had a really good friend who was an excellent cook.

One day, this friend of his thought of a nice joke and made a meal out of crow to Ioan, who was very happy with it and ate every piece of it. When he found out about the prank, Ioan almost went mad with rage and wanted to shoot the cook. Of course, hearing the noise, their superior had to interfere and finally calmed Ioan. Although the resolution had been accepted, the nickname “Cioranul” had clung to Bud Ioan and was even mentioned in the papers that he received when leaving the regiment, acknowledging the services brought to the empire.

Historical documents, also concerning his descendants, have been kept and are available today for consultation at the Maramureș County archives, specifically in

the city of Baia Mare. The nickname, however, has been preserved until now, being currently carried by Bud Ioan Cioropicul, the last male descendant.

This legend was put into the format of a ballad by Giurgiu Zorica Elvira, a member of the folk group „Țibleșul,” in 1988. Thus, through this ballad, the legacy of Bud Ioan Cioranul is carried on from the simple, profound meeting he had at the woods of Mount Țibleș. It is a story passed on through generations in order to conserve the cultural heritage of the people of Groșii Țibleșului.

<i>Balada satului Groșii Țibleșului</i>	<i>The Ballad of Groșii Țibleșului village</i>
Sus pe culmea muntelui	High on the mountain ridge,
Pân' de-a lungul șesului,	Down across the open plain,
Răsărit-au ulmi și fagi,	Elms and beeches once arose,
Mari, groși, lângă mândri brazi,	Tall and thick, beside proud firs.
Mulți haiduci au haiducit,	Many outlaws roamed these lands,
Dar de fagi n-au pomenit	Yet of such beeches none had spoken.
Numai un haiduc vestit	Only one renowned outlaw
Printre ei s-a rătăcit,	Lost his way among them all.
Suie creasta munților	He climbed the mountain's spine
Prin pădurea ulmilor,	Through the forest of the elms,
Suie pe un cal călare	Riding upward on his horse,
Și se coboară la vale,	Then descending to the vale.
E Bud Ioan Cioropic,	It was Bud Ioan Cioropic,
Om înalt, frumos, voinic,	Tall of stature, strong and fair.
De mirat ce se mira	Amazed beyond all measure,
Copacilor le grăia:	To the trees he thus did speak:
- Multă vreme-am haiducit	- Long I've lived the outlaw's life,
Dar ca voi nu am găsit.	Yet I've never found your like.
- Mulți codri am cutreierat,	- Many forests have I crossed,
Alții ca voi nu am aflat.	None as you have I come across.

- Câți mie, mi se făliră,  
Dar ca voi nu mă primiră.

- Ulmilor! și fagilor!

- Groșilor! Falnicilor!

- Lăsați-mă, să-mi fac casă

Aici în pădurea voastră,

Dintr-un ulm să-mi tai de-o masă,

Să am ce pune în casă

Să stau cu fărtații mei

Cu cei mândri haiducei

Că doinim vara cu drag,

Tot la umbra cea de fag;

Să ne pierdem urmele,

Să ne uităm zilele,

Să ne apărați pe noi

De vânturi grele, de ploi,

De iernuri, de geruiele,

De păgâni în zile grele.

Și mă jur, pe arma mea!

Că și eu voi apăra,

De limbi rele și păgâne,

Pe voi să nu vă închine

Și o să trăim cu drag,

Tot un haiduc și un fag...

Vântul printre ei bătea

Și frumos îi clătina,

Ramurile-și aplecau

Cu voinicul se-nvoiau.

Azi un copac se tăia,

- Many praised themselves to me,  
Yet none welcomed me like thee.

- O you elms! O you beeches!

- Stately ones! So proud and noble!

- Let me stay and build my home

Here within your forest deep,

From an elm I'll carve a table,

Something worthy for my house.

Let me sit with my companions,

With my proud band of outlaws bold,

Sing our songs in summer gladly,

Always in the beech-tree shade.

Hide our tracks and lose our days,

Shield us well from raging winds,

From harsh rains and winter's bite,

From the frost and icy nights,

From the heathen in dark times.

And I swear upon my blade,

I, in turn, will guard you too,

From foul tongues and pagan hands,

None shall bow you down in shame.

And we'll live in joy together,

Ever one outlaw and one beech...

The wind among them softly blew,

Gently swaying branch and leaf,

Lowering their boughs in answer,

In agreement with the brave one stood.

One tree fell today beneath the axe,

Altul încolo cădea.	Another followed soon thereafter,
Acum unul, mâine altul,	Now one more, tomorrow still another,
Așa s-a născut tot satul,	Thus the whole village was born,
Pe valea Țibleșului	In the valley of Țibleș,
La poalele muntelui	At the mountain's gentle feet,
Din copacii cei făloși	From those trees so proud and grand,
Și poartă numele „Groși”	And it bears the name “ <b>Groși.</b> ”

### **Pensiunea Schilacy - a heartwarming hospitality**

In the picturesque village of Groșii Țibleșului, you can enjoy a warm stay at Pensiunea Schilacy. This lovely guesthouse, located right in the center of the village, offers a perfect blend of comfort and local charm.

With spacious communal lounge areas and a fully fitted kitchen, it is thought to make you feel at home. Outside, a lush garden with a terrace, picnic area, barbecue facilities, and even a hot tub invites you to relax and enjoy the serene surroundings. Pensiunea Schilacy has a large courtyard for parking, with accommodation capacity exceeding nine rooms and holding approximately twenty guests.

However, the true highlight of this guesthouse is the warm hospitality extended by its owners, Nicolaie and Aurica, a beautiful and really hard working couple that instantly make you feel at home with their spontaneity and kindness.

During our stay this month, we were greeted with such kindness and warmth that we immediately felt at home. Nicolaie and Aurica really made the difference in our month here, and we left them feeling a bit homesick.

It really is a hard task to express how much we appreciate what they have done for us, but for sure, they are to be congratulated on the very special place that is Pensiunea Schilacy and all the new possibilities it is opening up for Groșii Țibleșului.

Thanks to them, this village, so full of offerings, is much closer now to visitors who would like to know, as close as possible, its rich culture and beauty of nature.

As they said to us; “Good people meet good people”. We learned so much from them, and we are already looking forward to our next visit. Thank you from the bottom of our hearts, we love you.



## **Education in Groșii Țibleșului**

### **Historical Background**

Education in Groșii Țibleșului has its roots in religious instruction, with the first documented school opening in the village in 1898. The two main educational institutions of that time are the Roman Catholic school in Hungarian and the Romanian Greek Catholic one in Romanian. At first, students' attendance remained low, which led to authorities imposing fines on families for not taking their children to school. This continued for a while, even after the union of 1918, where things took a positive turn in education and class enrollment. However, conditions were still challenging, as classes were often conducted from hired rooms or under trees, and back then the teachers frequently lacked formal pedagogical training. But they truly were very dedicated to educating the children of the village.

## Current Education Structure

Education in Groșii Țibleșului today is far more structured and formal and it proceeds under the direction of Maria Pop, the headmaster. She oversees the kindergarten, the primary school, and the lower secondary school of the village.

The path of education begins in Class Zero, which, as the name implies, is the last year of kindergarten. During this final kindergarten year, children get to know what sounds correspond to different letters and how to write the alphabet.

The primary school is from grades 1 to 5, and the lower secondary school is from grades 6 to 8. Students attend a high school either in the neighboring town (Țârgu Lăpuș) or they may need to relocate to a more far city, depending on the school address they choose.

Maria started her career as a kindergarten teacher. Having attended a pedagogical high school she had already gained some valuable experience in this domain. Ten years later, she started working as a primary school teacher. Almost three years ago, Maria was then appointed principal. We had the pleasure to visit the schools with her.

The kindergarten, situated next to the church, is also divided into two classes for the tender-age children.

Then, the school is divided into two buildings: the first in front of the town hall in the center of the village and the second a little further down the communal road. At the primary level, each class has one teacher for the full five years, except for the so-called single-out teachers for religion, physical education, and French. Each classroom is created completely independently by each teacher, representing the character or style of that particular teacher in charge. Learning is supported by a



curriculum that also contains a subject called „Dezvoltare Personală” (Personal Development), which helps students develop emotionally, learning about self-respect, and mutual respect through communication and dialogue.

At the first school building, there is a library with books for all grades and a green garden, where students can spend their breaks. The “Sala Sporturilor” (Sports Hall) located in the neighboring block hosts the physical education classes.

Pupils are expected to sit for an examination at the end of grade 8 that will eventually determine the type of high school to be attended. According to the results of the said exam, they will be applying to different types of high schools.

### **Treasures from the Pălăguța’s House**

In Groșii Țibleșului, there is another place where you can truly feel at home. Stepping inside Pălăguța Cosma’s house felt like entering a living archive of the village’s soul, where the true treasures are the very old traditional costumes she carefully preserved and proudly showed us. Each piece carried stories of past generations, silently bearing witness to the endurance and beauty of local traditions. Surrounded by these garments, we felt deeply connected to the history and spirit of the place. We also remember the days spent with Pălăguța, when she patiently showed us how to prepare *plăcintă* and shared poems she had written herself. Despite having little formal education, her childhood was marked by responsibilities far beyond her years, caring for the family’s animals and marrying early, yet she transformed these experiences into strength, creativity, and generosity. She is another person who embodies the living heritage of Groșii Țibleșului, lovingly shared with others.



## Conclusion

Through this journey we have discovered a glimpse of what Groșii Țibleșului is: a village that gathers in its bosom all the richness of tradition, community, and hard work. Its history, cultural habits, and educational development all bear witness to just how close the people of Groșii stand to the land and their heritage. This preservation of folk music, dances, and traditional clothes speaks to the pride the community has in its past, as stories and legends passed down through the generations continue to define this unique character of the village.

The people here can really make you feel at home and greet you with open arms in their lives and houses. We are profoundly grateful of the wonderful people we have met here and through this month we really did not know how to thank them enough.

We had the opportunity to be taken in by the closely knit community, to learn its history, to enjoy its traditions, and first and foremost to witness its kindness. Groșii Țibleșului may be small, yet it is a place full of heart and love.

A walk through Groșii Țibleșului is, in a way, taking a trip through times, cultures, and community and it made us realize that in the simplicity of village life, there is so

much wisdom and beauty. This is a place where past and present come into harmony with each other, keeping the traditions alive and also treating visitors as family. Thanks to all the people we have met here, we felt welcomed and at home and were able to change perspective and live another reality.

We hope that you liked our story! It seems that our experience was interesting even for the Romanian public radio (Radio România Actualități), and the post about our adventure generated a lot of engagement on their Facebook page. More photos and videos about our amazing month-long experience in Groșii Țibleșului can also be discovered on [LăpușXplorers](#) Facebook page.



# Understanding Community and Why Cultural Heritage Matters

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## **Introduction**

Rarely a day goes by that we don't hear about efforts to build community, expand community capacities, foster community development, or encourage community engagement. The attention given to community is important and provides insight into what we inherently believe to be important in our lives. Images of community depict fond notions of togetherness, social connections, and support from other residents. While international events and the pace of modern life impact us, it is the local day-to-day interactions with people that shape our lives. Such routine interaction and the social ties it fosters is the single most important factor in our efforts to develop community<sup>1</sup>.

In spite of the importance we place on community, attention to the critical component of social interaction has at times been divided. In recent decades there have been great calls for restoring our sense of community, social capital, and the stock of social connections that once may have existed (Putnam, 1997). In contrast, there are those that believe that community no longer exists and is irrelevant in our

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<sup>1</sup> The techniques and community development steps have been developed over decades by the likes of major community scholars and practitioners (Ken Wilkinson, A. E. Luloff, G. Theodori). A synthesis of these has also been included in a range of outreach and cooperative training materials for educators and communities by the authors (Brennan, Berardi, Malcolm). In particular, the authors at times have used parts of this chapter in training factsheets for educators at the University of Florida (Brennan) and the Pennsylvania State University (Brennan). Full materials can be consulted at <https://extension.psu.edu/in-search-of-a-common-understanding-of-community> and <https://ask.ifas.ufl.edu/>

modern globally connected world. Both views have been shaped by real and perceived changes in society and social structures over the past century. For example, gated communities, the continuing growth of the suburbs, increased commuting times to work, and smaller families are seen as eliminating, or at least severely limiting, connections to our neighbors. In our global and increasingly interconnected world, local life and the connections among local people are often seen as secondary to national social and economic development. All of these conditions shape our perceptions of what community is. They also shape what we perceive as the options for its development.

The confusion over community, and often the failure of efforts to develop it, stem from a casual and inconsistent use of the term. When asked, most people we talk to have a definition of community. It is also the case that most often these definitions will be markedly different depending upon whom we ask. This is in part do to the lack of a consistent definition as to what constitutes community, development, and civic engagement. This lack of clarity has led to policies and programs that only impact select geographic areas or select groups of people, and generally do not benefit the needs and wants of the entire local area. These same policies routinely ignore the unique social and cultural components of the community that are vital to effective programs and policies.

To impact our programs and best serve our populations, a need exists for local government, citizens' groups, change agents, and other policy-makers to have a consistent definition of what constitutes "community". We need to have the same (or at least similar) images of community in mind when we discuss, plan, implement, and evaluate programs designed to enhance local well-being.

### **The Community: A Process of Interaction**

Overall, most definitions of the community (Wilkinson, 1991; Bridger and Luloff, 2003; Bridger, Brennan, and Luloff, 2009) have one or more of the following components:

- A geographic or territorial dimension, most often referring to a place or locality. This is simply seen as a place where people live;
- A human life dimension containing a local society highlighted by social organization in which members satisfy their basic needs. People residing in such locations have their needs met through organizations and institutions which provide services, government, and social order; and
- A process of locality-oriented social actions in which residents of a community express their common interests and needs.

Yet the presence of these elements does not necessarily mean that local capacity exists. All of these exist to different levels within our local places, so it is true that the community exists to varying degrees in all of our home places. It is true that place and locality is an important component to community. However, community is much more than a geographic location. It is a social and psychological entity that represents a place, its people, and the relationships that exist there (Wilkinson, 1991). Interaction among local people serves to provide a basis for conscious community wide efforts aimed at improving social well-being (Wilkinson, 1991; Olson and Brennan, 2018). In this setting, civic engagement, community action, and social participation are seen as being central to the emergence of community and its development.

A more accurate definition of the community views locality as a place where people live and meet their common daily needs together. Rather than a geographic boundary, such places can be seen as a comprehensive network of individual relationships that meet routine needs and express common interests. However, it is necessary to recognize that not all relationships serve to create the sense of connection that characterizes community. It is only through a process of deliberate, focused, and interrelated actions that diverse segments of local society express their common interests and needs. This process of interaction culminates in the emergence of community. In sum, community is an always changing variable shaped by social interaction.

While often overlooked, these ideas are nothing new. Community theorist Ferdinand Tonnies stressed that community existed when institutions and individuals were drawn together not as a result of support needs, but because social togetherness is a positive condition that helps form a unified whole (Tonnies, 1957). Sociologist Ken Wilkinson saw community from an interactional perspective, where the emergence of community was a dynamic process of bringing people together (Wilkinson, 1991). Through interaction, an entity can emerge that is far greater than the sum of its parts. This focus does not imply that social structures, government, or systems are unimportant. The local economy, sociodemographic characteristics of the population, local organizations, culture, natural resources, and institutions are vital to the make up of the community and its residents (Bridger, Brennan, and Luloff, 2009). However, these factors serve as the backdrop for local life and the relationships among residents.

Interaction is a pervasive and constant feature of local life that provides substance to its ecological, cultural, organizational, and social psychological aspects (Wilkinson, 1991). Without such interaction, community could not exist. Interacting with others gives direction to processes of collective action and social participation, and is a source of common identity (Wilkinson, 1991).

Community is the local setting for contact between the individual and the wider society. In this setting most people meet their daily needs. As they share a common territory they interact with one another on a routine and substantive basis. These interactions increase awareness of local issues and problems and can lead to the development of purposive and focused actions aimed at enhancing local well-being. This process occurs only as diverse segments of a locality recognize their common needs, establish channels of communication, and work cooperatively to meet their needs.

As a result of changes that have taken place in the social, cultural, and political landscape over the past century, local societies have become increasingly prevalent,

but community has become something much more rare. Under such modern conditions, the actions of local residents in support of their community are vital to the community's social and economic viability. However, the purposive actions of local residents emerge only when the proper environment is present. Consequently, community can exist only as long as the people in the area care about each other and the place they live in. This care is expressed in the coordinated actions they take part in to enhance local well-being.

While many theories and definitions of community exist, most focus only on the place or the structures that are present there. It is interaction in various settings that links people together and facilitates the communication of local needs to the broader society. Such interaction serves to empower community residents and provide a mechanism for maintaining social networks and channels of communication that cut across social and cultural divides. By increasing venues for interaction, partnering with diverse community groups, and bringing together a wide spectrum of local residents, we can lay the basis for community action and development.

The definition of community presented here is not meant to present a romantic or idealized notion of local harmony and solidarity. Our localities are often dominated by self-interest, outside development, distrust, conflict, and other negative conditions. This however does not mean that community cannot exist. Community emerges out of interaction between diverse social groups, often with clashing or at least distinctly different points of view. This interaction facilitates the coming together of such groups to assess their common needs and increase awareness of issues facing all residents. From this process, residents form plans of action that benefit all involved and the community in general. This willingness to act is not based on altruistic feelings or beliefs that their efforts will be rewarded. Development of community is based on the collective needs of many groups who have realized common ground. Meeting these needs contributes to the greater well being of the locality.

In closing, it is important to be reminded that community is attainable. While it is true that in our society has changed greatly over the last century, community has not become irrelevant. In our modern world, people are often hesitant to commit themselves, their time, and their resources to the resolution of various social issues and problems. Nonetheless, many people routinely do. This is a result of the sense of community that is fostered through interaction, communication, and understanding of common needs.

When working with and planning for our communities we need to look beyond government and other structures that are in place. While these are of course important, we need to focus first on the local people. We need to focus on how they interact and feel about each other, how attached they are to the locality, and how they can contribute to local well-being. We need to look at the process of how and why they participate in their communities. Assessing such characteristics provides a clear target and focus for our efforts. It allows us to directly measure who is active in the communities and who is not. Steps can then be taken to encourage inclusive community wide participation. Such assessments also allow us to focus on the uniqueness and diversity that exist in each of our communities. By focusing on these characteristics we can create programs specifically designed to meet the particular social and economic needs of the locality.

### **Importance of Incorporating Local Culture and Heritage into Community Development**

Developmental trajectories of communities are usually explained by reference to economic history, human capital deficits, and/or the structure of local labor markets. Rarely is local culture seen as playing a significant role in development outcomes. Nor does empirical research routinely consider the role of local culture in fostering a more complete understanding of community development. Instead, culture is often viewed as an outgrowth of a particular region and dependent upon economic and other experiences, not an independent force.

Such perspectives miss an important aspect of the development process. The culture of a community significantly shapes debate and action. Local culture also presents unique options for locally based economic and other development. Local understandings and interpretations of a community's history reflect past events that feed into, and are partially driven by, the demands, sentiments, and interests of those in the present. This makes it crucial for community development practitioners to consider the importance of culture in efforts to improve local well-being. By paying attention to and incorporating unique cultural values, traditions, and related factors, more efficient and effective development efforts can be achieved.

Local culture provides a sense of identity for rural communities and residents. This identity facilitates common understandings, traditions, and values, all central to the identification of plans of action to improve well-being. Culture contributes to building a sense of local identity and solidarity. It influences the confidence rural communities have in coming together to address specific needs and problems. This local commitment among residents, regardless of economic or political conditions, can serve as a valuable tool in shaping the effectiveness of development options and local actions. Such commitment, based on culture and common identity, can be seen as a potentially important tool in sustaining local government, development, and social improvement efforts.

Providing a local linkage and cultural basis for development is important. People are likely to take part in and remain committed to development efforts to which they have a direct connection. Development efforts that consider or focus on culture provide a mechanism for linking local residents to the development process. Through such efforts, local residents can encourage development that preserves or promotes their culture. This is particularly important in development efforts that seek to elicit local participation, volunteerism, and community action. In understanding the place of culture in the development process, it is important to

consider the social basis of culture, its relationship to interaction, and the types of development and local actions it can contribute to.

### **Role of Local Culture**

The concept of culture has many definitions and interpretations. In social settings, it is often used broadly to represent entire ways of life. Included in such ways of life are rules, values, and expected behaviors. At its most basic level, culture can be seen as the shared products of a society. These products have a common meaning that accumulates over time and also reflects shared attachments among community members.

Culture can be seen as consisting of ideas, rules, and material dimensions. Ideas include such things as the values, knowledge, and experience held by a culture. Values are shared ideas and beliefs about what is morally right or wrong, or what is culturally desirable. Such values are abstract concepts and are often based in religion or culture, in that they reflect ideals and visions of what society should be. Such values often shape expected behavior and rules. These rules are accepted ways of doing things and represent guidelines for how people should conduct themselves and how they should act towards others.

Values and rules are often taken for granted and assumed to reflect a common understanding. Both, however, have direct origins and developed in response to conflicts or needs. At the core of such values and norms is a process of interaction that led to their emergence and acceptance. This process shapes the actions of individuals and social systems within their communities. Culture provides belonging and an arena in which residents can make a difference. At the same time, culture contributes to exclusionary practices and has been seen as a drag on development efforts. Regardless, it is clear that culture plays a critical role in local community action.

## **Applied Uses of Culture in Development**

The inclusion of culture into community and economic development models can take many shapes and forms. Culture can serve as the central focus. Included would be tourism and other efforts that focus largely on the promotion, preservation, or enhancement of local or regional cultures. Culture can also be a factor that needs to be addressed to determine its impact on new or existing development programs (resource management, environmental protection). In facing development, the programs that communities are willing to accept and embrace are likely to depend largely on cultural factors. It is therefore vital that problems and potential solutions be defined in a manner consistent with the local culture.

## **Culture as a Focus of Development**

Regional or local culture can serve as a basis for development. Such efforts can serve to promote the local identity, regional languages, and minority cultures. Efforts can focus on preservation or promotion of a culture, but can also use culture to mobilize the local population. Examples of cultural preservation or efforts focusing solely on a culture are often seen in relation to tourism and conservation efforts. Included are renovation of villages (architectural rehabilitation, etc.), highlighting the architectural heritage of an area (restoring historic sites to serve as a focal point for tourists), cultural venues (local heritage centers, traditional cultural events), traditional craft and artistic skills (development of industry and employment based on the production of items which are symbolic of the local culture), and cultural based entertainment and cultural dissemination (organization of cultural activities, festivals, permanent exhibitions). Equally important is the environmental aspects of culture, where traditional uses of natural resources or events symbolize local cultural ties to environmental processes (solstice festivals, harvest festivals, agriculture progress days).

These efforts serve as a basis for development, but also serve to maintain cultural traditions and ways of life. Furthermore, such forms of development highlight the importance of rural cultures and identify their role in shaping wider society. Finally, through such development, community and cultural identities are reinforced, and collective identities are strengthened. Such interaction can lead to an improved state of community and social well-being.

### **Culture and Territorial Development**

It is argued by some that development should focus clearly on specific sectors of the economy, while others argue that rural development should be more tailored to the unique cultural characteristics of rural areas and highlight their territorial elements. These sectoral approaches have been central to most “top-down” or government-led development. Sectoral programs have, however, received criticism. Such programs are often seen as being too broad in scope and application to account for the diversity and unique needs of rural areas.

In response to such conditions, a shift from sectoral to territorial rural development policy has been suggested. In such policies, social cohesion and comprehensive planning have been included. Territorial approaches are best suited to meet the unique and complex conditions present in rural areas. The local culture is part of this later development model. As a result, increasing attention is being given to local level and “bottom-up” approaches which focus on culture, territory, local diversity, and the optimization of local resources. Territorial approaches seek to enhance the particular strengths of a rural locality by developing the potential of local resources such as individuals, businesses, and communities. Such perspectives tend to include a recognition of the total environment in which local rural development operates. Such methods attempt to address the interdependencies of people, the environment, and the communities within a locality. Enhancing or focusing on local culture serves this process.

## **Implications for Programming**

The perceptions of rural and urban areas, their economic bases, and means for their development will need to be more closely considered in future policy efforts. This is particularly true when considering the changing character of rural areas and the diversity of communities there. Local culture plays a central role in shaping community development, local character, and responses to needs. Continuing to ignore culture's critical role will constrain development efforts, rendering them little more than short-term solutions for endemic rural problems.

The relationship between culture and community development is vast. However, this important relationship is rarely accorded a significant role in the design of development efforts. Using an interactional approach to community development provides opportunities for incorporating insights into the role and place of culture. Further, it means conceptualizing development so as to highlight the importance of establishing and enhancing social relationships. Aligning such development with cultural promotion and preservation can serve as a tool for successful development. Moreover, focusing on the erosion of solidarity or culture would provide insight into the lack of progress or the presence of obstacles impeding existing development efforts. Future decisions will need to be made about the types of development activities pursued. In this light, territorial perspectives that focus on local cultures and their attributes appear to provide a more comprehensive approach than those that focus on specialized economic sectors. Local culture is a fundamental component of community life, which shapes the unique character, needs, and possibilities of individual rural areas. Indeed, it differentiates communities, making one-size-fits-all policies and programs largely irrelevant.

Culture and attachment to it can be used as a motivating factor in opposing “anti-local development” activities such as extra-local development and exploitation.

Using culture to motivate community members can serve as a tool for policymakers and others interested in encouraging development at the local level. Culture can be seen as presenting both the means and ends of development. To a great extent, it is by emphasizing the wealth and diversity of their cultural heritage that rural areas will be able to develop those activities that enhance social and economic well-being. Communities and rural development specialists will need to understand and learn to capitalize on the strengths of community solidarity and culture.

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# **Empowering Your Community: Why it is important and how to do it**

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## **Introduction**

The need for local participation and the organization of local residents to meet the challenges facing their communities is of increasing importance<sup>2</sup>. Program professionals and policy-makers are more frequently faced with the task of establishing programs in settings characterized by conflict among different groups of stakeholders with very different needs, values, and policy preferences. In many communities, these conflicts are often rooted in differences between groups that seek to protect community quality and those that seek to exploit local resources (especially the local workforce and natural resource base) as a means of achieving economic development. Equally common is the consistent transfer of responsibilities for services from government agencies to the private community sector. Such conditions have resulted in local residents taking on a greater role in providing services and planning for future needs.

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<sup>2</sup> The techniques and community development steps have been developed over decades by the likes or major community scholars and practitioners (Ken Wilkinson, A. E. Luloff, G. Theodori). A synthesis of these has also been included in a range of outreach and cooperative training materials for educators and communities by the authors (Brennan, Berardi, Malcolm). In particular, the authors at times have used parts of this chapter in training factsheets for educators at the University of Florida (Brennan) and the Pennsylvania State University (Brennan). Full materials can be consulted at <https://extension.psu.edu/in-search-of-a-common-understanding-of-community> and <https://ask.ifas.ufl.edu/>

In response to the pressures and changes in our communities, activists, grassroots social change organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and coalitions of concerned community groups have emerged to shape and guide the development process. Similarly organized local residents have played instrumental roles in identifying new development options in localities that historically were presented with few such options. Small-scale civil society organizations (SCSOs) sometimes develop in communities with holistic responses to community needs (McGovern, 2013; Olson and Brennan, 2018; Olson and Brennan, 2017). These and other types of community-based action in these and other settings is seen as essential to community development and to the social and economic well-being of the locale.

### **Community and the Action Process**

The emergence of community involves both interaction among residents and community action. Community action refers to the process of building social relationships in pursuit of common community interests and maintaining local life (Wilkinson, 1991). Community action is seen as being the foundation of the community development process because it encompasses deliberate and positive efforts designed to meet the general needs of all local residents. This process represents multiple and diverse interests in the locality, and consequently provides a more comprehensive approach to community development (Wilkinson, 1991). Therefore, the action process is intended to benefit the entire community and to cut across divides that may exist (class, race, social), often arising from an emotional or social need (Phillimore & McCabe, 2015).

In the process of community development, local action focuses on the improvement of social well-being and involves people working together in pursuit of their general interests. This power is manifested in the ability of individuals to come together and work toward common goals. When diverse individuals and their organizations interact with one another, they begin to mutually understand the

needs and wants that are common to all residents (Wilkinson, 1991; Bridger, Brennan, and Luloff, 2011; McGovern, 2013; Phillimore & McCabe, 2015). Such action provides local residents with the ability to retain community identities, maintain local control over decision-making, and address their own development needs. It is a central component of community and social well-being.

The existence of community action directs attention to the fact that local people acting together often have the power to transform and change their community (Gaventa, 1980; Bridger, Brennan, and Luloff, 2011; Olson and Brennan, 2018; Olson and Brennan, 2017; McGovern, 2013). Community action and corresponding development can be seen as the process of building relationships that increase the adaptive capacity of local people within a common territory. This adaptive capacity is reflected in the ability of people to manage, utilize, and enhance those resources available to them in addressing their local issues (Wilkinson, 1991; Bridger, Brennan, and Luloff, 2011; Luloff and Bridger, 2003; Phillimore & McCabe, 2015; McGovern, 2013). As long as people care about each other and the place they live, every community has the potential for such collective action. This ability allows distinctions to be made between simple aggregates of people and actual communities.

### **The Community Action Process**

To impact social well-being, community action must seek the development of community, not simply the individual elements within it (Summers, 1986; Christenson and Robinson, 1989; Wilkinson, 1991; McGovern, 2013; Olson and Brennan, 2018; Olson and Brennan, 2017). The community action process can be seen as containing far more than simple individual actions and efforts (Wilkinson, 1991; Seyfang & Smith, 2007; McGovern, 2013). Most effective action efforts proceed through a series of steps that focus on solving specific problems and bringing residents closer together. Five stages of accomplishment, including

initiation, organization of sponsorship, goal setting, recruitment, and implementation, can be identified within this process (Wilkinson, 1970; Wilkinson, 1991):

1. The first stage, initiation, focuses on promoting awareness of the issue related to the action. Initiation and spread of interest occur when community members recognize and define an issue as being a problem or need, and begin to discuss it as a potential focus for group action.
2. The second stage focuses on the organization of sponsorship. This step addresses the structures, organizations, and resources available within and outside of the community. Such factors are important in relation to assessing community needs and the development of action efforts to address perceived problems.
3. The third stage is goal setting and strategy development. This stage develops targets for action and identifies strategies for achieving community-decided goals.
4. The fourth stage is recruitment and mobilization of needed resources including people, money, and materials. Community members possess a variety of experience, skills, funding, materials, networks, and other resources vital to achieving desired community goals. Organizing and maximizing these resources significantly impacts the success of community action efforts.
5. The final stage involves the application of these resources in the implementation of plans to achieve the desired goals. At this stage, specific actions are taken, assessed, adjusted, and implemented again.

Community action and the emergence of community should not be seen as representing romantic or idealized notions of local harmony and solidarity (Wilkinson, 1991; Bridger, Brennan, and Luloff, 2011; Luloff and Bridger, 2003; McGovern, 2013; Olson and Brennan, 2018; Olson and Brennan, 2017). The truth is that focused and

deliberate action represents something far different. Action emerges out of interaction between diverse social groups, who often have clashing or at least distinctly different points of view. Interaction facilitates the coming together of such groups to assess their common and general needs. From this, they form plans for action that benefit all involved, and ultimately the community in general.

The importance of organizing diverse local residents to help shape local development cannot be overstated. By providing a comprehensive assessment of local conditions that represents all segments of the community, more efficient and successful programs can be developed. The input and guidance from local residents allows development to build on the unique conditions and character of the community and allow local decision-making to remain in the locale. All of these create an environment where active local residents directly shape the community and its well-being.

### **Empowering Your Community, Stage 1: Initiation**

Local residents are increasingly asked to take on a greater role in providing community services and planning for future needs. In response to the pressures and changes facing our communities, activists, grassroots social change organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and coalitions of concerned community groups have emerged to shape and guide the development process. Similarly, organized residents continue to play instrumental roles in identifying new development opportunities in localities that historically were presented with few such options.

Community-based action, in these and other settings, is seen as essential to the development of community and local well-being. In its most basic form, this action refers to the process of building social relationships in pursuit of common community interests and maintaining local life (Dolan and Brady, 2012; Luloff and Bridger, 2003; Wilkinson, 1970; Wilkinson, 1991). Social support comes in the form of

practical, emotional, and tangible support; qualities include closeness to others, capacity to exchange support rather than one being beholden to others, ability to be helpfully critical in ways that are not dismissive or demeaning, and occurring in contexts of reliable and durable relationships (Cutrona, 2000). Such actions are the foundation of the community development process because it represents deliberate and positive efforts designed to meet the general needs of all local residents. Community-based research, driven by the organization of local residents, is increasingly being shown to help with social innovation, solving complex community issues, and public policy improvements (Ochocka and Janzen, 2014).

While central to the emergence of community, the organizing of local residents into community actions does not take place by itself. It is a process that needs to be cultivated and systematically approached. Through this process, the interactions of local residents develop through a series of steps that focus on solving specific problems, establishing channels of communication, and establishing a framework for long-term social change (Wilkinson, 1991). The first stage focuses on initiating community interest and promoting awareness of issues as well as establishing opportunities for participation in action (Wilkinson, 1970; Wilkinson, 1991).

### **Initiation of Community Action**

While interaction among residents facilitates many of the basic human needs, the development of purposive community action requires more focused links between members to foster change. The first phase of community action is *initiation* (Wilkinson, 1991; Luloff and Bridger, 2003). Initiation and the spread of interest occurs when residents from across the community identify common needs and begin to discuss these as a potential focus for group action, which can also be referred to as community-based research (Luloff and Swanson, 1995; Ochocka and Janzen, 2014; Wilkinson, 1991). This process facilitates the spread of awareness

across diverse groups and reflects the process of acknowledging common needs/problems and the recognition that solutions exist (Korsching and Allen, 2004; Ochocka and Janzen, 2014). By addressing these commonalities and planning possible solutions, the community action process begins.

For example, a local school board and a real estate broker can have widely different priorities that they feel are essential to meeting the needs of their particular social groups. Through interaction in a variety of settings, however, both agree that they and other groups have mutual community needs, such as community safety. Instead of the school board asking for increased security guards and the real estate sector pushing for more police coverage, the groups realize that a partnership such as a neighborhood crime watch program and a homeowner's association would achieve a greater impact. Such efforts would not only help the school protect its students but also increase property values and the preservation of neighborhood security. Bringing in even more groups such as religious, business, civic organizations, and others within the community would further expand the representation of local voices in the decision-making process.

The identification of common needs and initiation of efforts to meet these needs can take many forms. Often the active choice of diverse residents to organize results from some immediate threat or overarching need. In fact, it is often only in times of crisis that one values their social networks which are sources of social support (Bolger, 2016; Coulshed and Orme, 2006). Such conditions often make the organization of active individuals simpler and more direct. Community action often focuses solely on the success or failure of efforts to address these needs (task accomplishment). While such conditions are of course beneficial to bringing people together, they can serve only short-term action efforts. Considering such factors, it is useful for outreach and other change agents to consider more long-term plans and to frame action as part of a greater effort to address the lasting viability of the

community. Bringing together residents in such settings is not based around a single contentious issue, but rather in response to the need to contribute to the general local well-being of residents. In this way, a strong network will exist to address crises that arise.

### **Including Initiation in Programs**

When issues are identified and discussed in the initiation stage, they are often in the context of accomplishing one or more specific goals. Herein lies the importance of interaction: when diverse residents communicate about issues facing their shared locality, they are building relationships between members who would otherwise not interact. As a product of such interaction *within* community, the development of community emerges.

Change does not come only from those formally named as community organizers, but from people who live and interact within a community. Recognizing these people as important assets and direct agents of change is imperative to shaping the emergence of community. The initiation stage of community action is therefore essential to increasing individual awareness and providing a venue for people to become active. Initiation can include the following actions:

- **Start with a small number of people who represent the diversity of the community**

Identifying stakeholders, leaders from various groups throughout the community, and other important partners will help frame initial efforts. This includes members of the business community, social service sector, local government, school board, Parent-Teacher Associations, local newspapers and media, as well as religious leaders. These individuals are the primary connection to the diverse groups that comprise the community and can serve to bring a wider audience into development efforts.

- **Identify groups not represented**

Based on the initial grouping of individuals identified, it will be possible to identify individuals/groups missing from the decision-making process. To better identify these groups, a listing or map of all of the social fields within the community (e.g., religious, social, business, government) and the organizations or groups that comprise these fields (e.g., churches or synagogues, chamber of commerce, city commission, Kiwanis club) can be developed. This process helps identify those voices that might be missing from local decision-making. To be successful, community action efforts must be inclusive of the many different groups and perspectives within the community. By fostering diverse interactions and relationships across the locality that would otherwise not occur, an entity stronger than the sum of its parts develops.

- **Develop a framework for linking fields and bringing in new people**

Once the organizations existing within the community are identified, innovative, creative, and unique strategies for addressing issues that build on the strengths of the locality can be developed. Building on the diverse skills and backgrounds present within the community, this approach involves meeting local needs through methods unique to the locality instead of concentrating on traditional courses of action. This framework involves innovation and allows us to link a variety of organizations and institutions within the locality towards its given needs.

- **Spread awareness through all channels available**

With groups and partners identified, it is important to begin a course of action for spreading awareness. By identifying various groups and establishing channels of communication, these groups can in turn disseminate the information about local issues to their respective members. For example, efforts to raise awareness and call residents to action can be presented at civic events, festivals, sports events, religious gatherings, and town meetings.

Initiation and creation of awareness is a vital first step in the community action process. From this stage, strong relationships are established that represent the entire community. These relationships cut across the various divides and social barriers that exist within our communities. More importantly, the initiation and creation of awareness provides a strong foundation for stage two of the action process, *organization of sponsorship*. Initiation is the first step in the process that allows local residents to take on a more direct and active role in local decision-making, thereby taking on an increased say in the decisions that shape their lives.

### **Empowering Your Community, Stage 2: Organization of Sponsorship**

Community action is an active and dynamic process, not simply a static occurrence. The first action stage, initiation (Berardi et al., 2021) spreads interest in and increases awareness of issues and lays the foundation for the second stage, organization of sponsorship. This second stage continues the process of increasing awareness and focuses on establishing group structure and the organizing of resources needed for grassroots organizations, non-profits, or other groups to achieve their goals (Wilkinson, 2023). Such factors are important in relation to assessing community assets, and needs, and to the formation of action efforts to address perceived problems (Wilkinson, 2023).

Organization of sponsorship is characterized by the development of formal and informal partnerships among diverse social groups and organizations that cut across social and economic lines. These partnerships and channels of communication set the stage for action efforts that meet the general needs of the entire community (Wilkinson, 2023; Larson, et al, 2015; Olson & Brennan, 2018). Partnerships can give formal group structure to a focused community action, while simultaneously allowing for maximization of resources.

## **Organization of Sponsorship for Community Action**

The organization of sponsorship in the community action process often involves the creation of a new group or the adaptation of an existing group to deal with some local problem or issue (Wilkinson, 1970). This process involves coordination and integration of actions within and across various segments of a local society. This is accomplished through the formation of diverse networks and associations among individuals within different organizations. These linkages assure continued contact across social groups or interest lines that go beyond the lifespan of any one single action issue (Wilkinson, 2023; Luloff & Bridger, 2003). In forming a new action group, the members should be both reflective of the diverse residents of the community and united under an agenda of common needs and interests. This allows for individuals and organizations with distinct, but interrelated pursuits, to come together for community action.

Establishing a group structure and identifying community resources are the keys to the organization of sponsorship stage. Collaborative structure and practices may vary, and consideration for the norms and rules defining the group is necessary. Action groups may be bound by pre-conceived rules and regulations which guide participation and decision making, or groups may be flexible and able to communicate and define goals (Matarrita-Cascante et al., 2020) Lastly, new action groups need to consider power distribution and whether a hierarchical structure is employed or if the group can support power balanced across parties. The difference in power dynamics can contribute to group effectiveness, the communication environment, and result in trust and shared responsibility (Matarrita-Cascante et al., 2020). Without such structures in place, the goal and vision setting and strategy development that take place in stage three will be very challenging.

## **Including Organization of Sponsorship in Programs**

When structure and resources are developed during the organization of sponsorship stage, a basis for expanding community action efforts and the development of programs emerges. Recognizing the human, social, and financial assets present among change agents allows for a pooling of the resources necessary to achieve effective community action. The organization of sponsorship stage of community action is therefore vital to long term program development and the development of action plans. Organization of sponsorship can include the following efforts:

- **Develop the framework for forming a group structure**

An assessment must be made regarding whether to create a new group or adapt an existing group to deal with some local problem or issue. Through these and other efforts, a diverse group of individuals which share common and uncommon ideas emerges. This framework allows for diversity in the decision-making process and enables a variety of organizations or members to be linked and work towards a common goal. Based on the interest and experience of these individuals, duties and roles can be developed to advance the community group's goals and objectives. In order to make this assessment, there are several actions that can include:

- calling a meeting of interested parties to plan for action,
- putting an ad in the local newspaper,
- asking local governmental officials to take responsibility for common needs or issues,
- appointing a committee to address the issue, forming a new group/committee to address the issue, or
- talking to friends and colleagues to garner support and set up a new network.

## **Establish a decision-making structure to prepare for goal-setting and strategic planning**

Once a group structure is in place, a strategic plan must be developed. For the plan to be developed and implemented properly, a hierarchy or structure must be determined by all individuals involved. Forming a Board of Directors or an ad hoc committee are two ways to handle this. The formation of subcommittees to address specific components of the action plan can also emerge at this stage. This structure will evolve over time as new members are brought in, and as the complexity of the action plans become evident.

## **Identify community resources**

It is important to maximize existing resources within a community. Resources can take a variety of forms (financial, human, and physical). Different social groups have access to different resources; therefore, pooling resources is more conducive to accomplishing joint action and assists in reaching a wider community with the action efforts. Pooling resources can include:

- asset mapping,
- developing an inventory of skills and capabilities of community members,
- classifying local organizations into categories to coordinate organizing a council of agencies
- identifying fund raising opportunities,
- assessing and consolidating financial resources,
- coordinating legal assistance,
- assessing the action agendas of other local groups,
- assessing and coordinating local human resources.

## **Develop a strategy for allocating resources**

Once resources are identified, a strategy must be developed to allocate those resources effectively and in a timely manner. The key here is to be able to apply resources to accomplish multiple goals and needs. Included would be actions to determine what other community organizations or groups are addressing the same issue or need. Partnerships and collaboration with such groups can then be undertaken to utilize resources effectively and enhance partnerships. For example, if a community is trying to address teenage pregnancy, and an organization is already teaching courses on family planning, perhaps the new group formed could provide follow-up information in a brochure or on their Web site. Effective resource allocation involves collaborating with other community organizations, examining local and state resources, and long-term planning of such allocation. Misusing resources can stifle the community action process.

Organization of sponsorship is the second key step in the community action process. In this stage, the newly formed or already existing group, formally comes together and assesses the resources necessary to develop visions, goals, and a strategic plan. Stage two allows a diverse group of citizens to initiate social change through focused community action. This collaboration not only enhances individual community members' well-being and sense of attachment to the community, but also allows them to see how collaborative efforts can be effective in producing change within their community. Ultimately, organization of sponsorship provides a strong group structure, which is the basis for stage three of the action process: visioning, goal setting, and strategy formation.

## **Empowering Your Community, Stage 3: Goal Setting**

Based on the previous stages of action (*Initiation and Organization of Sponsorship*) organized community residents are now ready to move forward in the formulation

of action plans (Wilkinson, 2023; Olson & Brennan, 2018; Berardi & Brennan, 2020). In this stage, *Goal Setting and Strategy Formulation*, the group develops a common vision and establishes measurable means for achieving this vision. Such plans and action transcend the individual self-interest of participants, as well as those of the groups or organizations that they represent. The goal setting and strategy formulation process reflects the tangible and measurable general needs of the entire locality.

### **The Goal Setting and Strategy Formulation Process**

The formulation of goals and strategies is vital to the development of effective action and community development efforts (Wilkinson, 2023; Olson & Brennan, 2018). To begin this process, the forces shaping the community must be identified. Residents take this time to identify what resources exist within the community and how to mobilize them, as well as what deficiencies and needs the community would benefit from addressing (Matarrita-Cascante et al., 2020). Asset mapping highlights the unique local conditions present (community skills or niche markets) and building interdependences and ways residents can share their talents. A needs assessment highlights challenges the community is facing such as the need for improved infrastructure, service opportunities, housing, or jobs.

A combination of goals/objectives that include both needs and assets is often effective when including community residents provides for a co-designed and co-produced set of goals (Matarrita-Cascante et al., 2020). This process shows the obstacles facing communities, but also the unique capacity that local people have for overcoming these challenges. By having a needs assessment and asset map and then ranking information from the two, in order of importance and potential for achieving change, local groups can develop a vision and action agenda. This vision will serve as the general focus for action and community development efforts.

## **Building Goal Setting & Strategy Formulation into Programs**

Program professionals or agents of change can help residents identify key issues, evaluate community assets, and aid in the development of action agendas by community residents. Useful steps can include:

### **Identification of Issues, Needs, and Assets**

By bringing together the residents identified in Step 1 (Initiation) and Step 2 (Organization of Sponsorship), a broad-based representation of the community is in place. This group should be able to speak to the wide range of needs, issues, and assets present in the community. Participants can be asked to list these, and then the overall group can discuss and rank the list in terms of importance, as well as the feasibility of successfully achieving change. This process of assessing local conditions, can take place in individual meetings or over the course of several sessions, depending on the complexity or scope of conditions facing the community. At the end of these sessions, participants will have an agreed-upon vision of what the community should look like.

### **Establishing Priorities and Organizing Participants**

Based on the issues and assets identified, residents can begin to develop plans to achieve community change. Once a rating and prioritization of issues and assets has taken place, specific measurable and achievable goals should be established. In practice, most action efforts will contain more than one area of focus. To adequately address these multiple areas and to establish goals for achieving change for each, it is useful to form subgroups or committees. Membership on these groups can be on a volunteer basis or members can be appointed based on their specific skills, experiences, or other characteristics (these can be documented through asset mapping and other activities).

Subgroups can serve as collectors of local data on a particular issue (scope of problems, changes in populations, number of people impacted, community resources available to meet needs). While these subgroups operate individually, it is essential that they be directly linked to the mission of the overall group and the goal of community development. The goal of these subgroups should be to compile usable and manageable data that can give insight into areas for local grassroots action.

### **Review of Data and Other Relevant Resources**

Using the data compiled by the subgroups, a detailed overview of the factors shaping a particular community issue can be developed. This data and findings can be presented to the overall group to discuss potential scenarios to achieve change. As the overall group is a diverse group of community residents, they may bring unique and non-traditional options for development to the table, which in other settings might not be heard. Included in this process can be the introduction of university outreach and other subject matter experts to present programs and curriculum that have been useful in similar situations.

### **Visioning, Goals, and Strategy Formulation**

With solid data in hand and a clear understanding of the issues, each subgroup can then develop their own vision statements, goals, and clearly defined strategies for addressing their goals. Community and group/subgroup leaders play a key role in developing these items through their experience in proposing procedures, setting standards, and sharing knowledge to accomplish mutually agreed upon strategies (Lamm et al., 2017). These items are defined as:

- *Vision statements*: long-range descriptions of the community and what local people want it to be.
- *Goals*: clearly defined and measurable, including milestones and logically attainable achievements.

- *Strategies*: special projects, step-by-step methods for achieving goals, plans for mobilizing resources, and plans for drawing cross-community support.

### **Presentation of Goals and Strategies to Organizing Groups**

Following the formulation of ideas for subgroup visions, goals, and strategies, a need exists for these to be presented to the larger group for feedback and constructive contributions from others. This allows for adjustments and improvements to the original plans. Depending on the group, this can take considerable time and it may be effective to distribute discussions of goals and objectives over more than one meeting. It may also be useful to elicit comments and responses through e-mail, fax, and other flexible means. The key to remember is that the more feedback that can be provided, the better the plans for action will be.

The organization of goals, visions, and strategies for change are vital to the long-term success of local community development and action efforts (Wilkinson, 2023; Matarrita-Cascante et al., 2020; Berardi & Brennan 2020). While plans for action can change over time, it is essential that, from the beginning, they be reflective of, and guided by, community needs and capacities. This allows more holistic plans of action to be developed and implemented. The *Goal Setting and Strategy Formulation* stage is essential in that it provides a clearly defined strategy for enhancing community well-being. This vision and strategy stage creates a solid basis for the next stage, Recruitment, which provides active local citizens with a framework for involvement in efforts to improve local well-being.

### **Empowering Your Community, Stage 4: Recruitment**

The previous three stages of community action developed the group structure and focused plans for change. In the fourth stage, community action efforts are advanced through *Recruitment* (Wilkinson, 2023; Olson & Brennan, 2018; Berardi & Brennan, 2020). While small-scale recruitment efforts may have emerged earlier

during the initial formation of the group (stages 1 and 2), the recruitment in stage four represents a clear and focused process of identifying and mobilizing local activists who can significantly contribute to community action efforts. However, this stage must be open to the entire community and representative of the diverse groups of people who reside in it (Olson & Brennan, 2018; Matarrita-Cascante et al., 2020). While we may be familiar with people that we already believe to be capable of leading community action, we might be unaware of other individuals who can contribute to an even greater extent. The process of recruitment serves to bring in new voices, skills, and experiences and to prove to the community that participation from all is wanted and encouraged.

### **Recruitment**

Facilitating the recruitment and the active involvement of residents in community development efforts often can be time consuming and challenging. Recruitment can become even more time consuming when seeking a broad and representative grouping of the whole community. However, in order to build community support, involvement, and interaction, all community residents should have the opportunity to actively contribute. While it is often unrealistic to expect total participation, all efforts must be made to actively and routinely reach out to members of the diverse groups that make up the community. It may be helpful to ask group leaders to invite and empower other community residents to join and share leadership in a learning environment where all can build upon the strengths of others in the group (Lamm et al., 2017).

The recruitment phase originates from the effort of the original group of active residents, council, or planning committee to mobilize and plan for action (work completed in previous stages). Through the initial stages, economic, human, physical and other resources are mobilized. During this process, cohesion develops, leadership is enhanced/developed, and the actions of various groups are focused to

achieve maximum impact. This stage also helps increase the sense of ownership, self-reliance, and agency community residents have over the action plan (Matarrita-Cascante et al., 2020). At this point in the action process, a committed and active force of community residents is recruited to carry out action plans.

### **Recruitment in Your Programs**

The recruitment stage can be successfully implemented by taking a variety of steps. Each of these recommendations build upon the framework established in the earlier stages and provides a wide range of opportunities for increasing awareness and drawing others into the action process.

#### **Hold a formal community-wide gathering of residents**

Holding a community meeting to inform residents of the group's vision, goals, and strategies for improving local life is a useful way to create awareness and to provide opportunities for involvement. Once again, it is vital that no individual or group feels alienated, uninvited, or unwelcome. If such conditions emerge, the end results are likely to have disastrous effects on community action efforts. All means available to reach a wide audience should be used to promote, market, and generally encourage attendance from all community members. Some avenues for reaching the whole community include:

- advertising in local newspaper
- social media posts and advertisements
- newsletters and emails
- digital and print flyers
- school and church bulletins
- public announcements through politicians, leaders, organizers, and religious representatives
- formal invitations extended to all resident groups, coalitions, and organizations

### **Present a focused overview of the action efforts**

Once brought together, this diverse group should be informed of the planning and actions taken to date by the original group of participants and organizers. Included would be introductions, presentations describing the background of organizers, and a summary of the events that have brought them together. Also included would be a presentation of the mission statement, goals, objectives, and strategies for achieving change. For all of these items, it is vital that the process and activities that led to the creation of these items be fully presented and explained in detail to all interested parties. This serves to enlighten future participants as to the scope of the issues (as supported with data accumulated in stages 1 through 3), as well as to legitimize the community action efforts by showing all efforts have been developed in an unbiased and systematic way.

### **Provide opportunities for general public feedback and contribution**

Those presenting community action efforts are provided with a remarkable opportunity to receive feedback from other community residents who can actively contribute to the formation of goals and objectives. This meeting also provides an opportunity to gauge the reaction to proposed community action efforts and the acceptance or rejection of these efforts can be a valuable tool in the program and policy development for the organization.

It is therefore vital that invited participants have extensive opportunities for voicing questions or concerns and to provide various forms of feedback. It is also an opportunity to measure the group's reaction to proposal plans of actions and to instigate group discussions. During this meeting and discussion, all efforts should be made to promote the program to attendees and to encourage their active participation. This can take several forms, depending on the population. Activities such as formal meetings, focus groups, group interviews, and other tactics can be

used to measure public interest and support, as well as to address needs that are not otherwise common knowledge.

### **Formal initiation for participation and active involvement**

The above steps culminate in an opportunity to formally invite all community residents to be actively involved in community action efforts. This opportunity cannot be overstated, and further highlights the importance of the previous steps in the community action process. This is the single best opportunity to garner public support and to recruit activists, helping to share responsibility and create sustainable support for the action plan. At this point, participants can be asked to self-select into subgroups or to sign up to participate in the general program.

This stage is essential in that it provides the basis for developing an active, enthusiastic, and informed group of activists. These are the troops that will carry out the active phase of community development. These informed and active citizens will also aid in spreading awareness of issues and serve to bring other residents into active involvement. Those brought together during the recruitment stage will lead the next phase, *Implementation*.

### **Empowering Your Community, Stage 5: Implementation**

The *Implementation* stage launches all planned efforts and directly attempts to facilitate community change. Building on the previous four stages of community action (Wilkinson, 2023; Berardi & Brennan, 2020; Olson & Brennan, 2018), the time is now at hand to commit all resources and transform plans into action. During *Implementation*, actions, influence, and transformations of power relations contribute to the empowerment of community residents increasing the self-determination to influence their lives and environment (Matarrita-Cascante et al., 2020).

The development of community is not a one-time event in which success or failure is detailed. It is a process where the bringing together of actively interested and diverse community people is a measure of success. This stage is the final in the process of community action, which creates space and continued focus for further iterative action by residents aided by the evaluation and feedback provided throughout.

### **Including Implementation in Programs**

Throughout the previous stages, resources were gathered and assessed, subgroups formed to focus on specific tasks, and active citizens recruited. In the Implementation stage, these resources are formally committed, and people are given the task of going forward to achieve the goals established by the organization and its subgroups. This stage in the process ensures that power is transferred to the community and not left in the hands of individual change agents or those leading the groups (Matarrita-Cascante et al., 2020). To maximize their impact, each subgroup should:

- **Meet to review goals, objectives, and immediate steps for action**

As action efforts are launched, it is essential that all participants be clear about the planned goals and the methods for meeting these goals. It may be the case that newer activists are uncertain or unclear about the specifics of how change will be achieved. A brief meeting or transmission of information (video, email, action guide, etc.) would be useful in making certain that everyone involved is aware of (1) how to proceed and (2) the resources available to support successful action.

- **Identify clear and measurable stages or benchmarks for all objectives**

While goals, objectives, and action plans have already been established in stage 3, it will be useful to identify clear benchmarks or measurable impacts. This will serve to

provide activists with feedback and to show transparency where action efforts are making progress. Such measurable impacts will also show the general public that the organization is fostering positive changes on behalf of the community. As milestones are achieved, these can be promoted and marketed accordingly.

- **Take Action**

Empowered with plans and a detailed background, activists and subcommittees can actively move forward. As they take action, opportunities and mechanisms for feedback and discussion should be presented and widely available. These opportunities can be through meetings, informal gatherings, email communications, or established contacts that can be reached to provide the insight and advice needed to adjust action plans.

- **Celebrate achievements (and failures)**

As achievements are made and measurable impacts achieved, it is important to celebrate and promote them through informal celebrations, in the media, and in other promotional avenues. It may also be the case that some action efforts have failed. The fact that these did not reach success is irrelevant and should be celebrated as the first efforts of what will be many valid action efforts. Community development is achieved if diverse groups are brought together and channels of communication established since these are essential to achieving empowered residents. From this process, future efforts will emerge that will achieve success.

- **Evaluate and readjust**

Community development and locally based action is a never-ending process. Both need to be continuously cultivated. As progress in various forms is made, it is essential that mistakes, obstacles, and inconsistencies in application be identified and addressed. To fine tune our action efforts, opportunities to effectively measure outcomes and provide feedback are vital to the long-term achievement of goals. To

provide feedback, formal debriefing meetings should be established at the conclusion of action efforts. These meetings can evaluate progress, identify obstacles, and explore new means for dealing with unforeseen problems. At these debriefing meetings, all subgroups/committees can report on their activities, progress, obstacles, and methods for adjusting to challenges. Collectively, these meetings set the stage for long-term action efforts and continued social changes.

The five stages of the community action process are made of more than individual actors and actions. These stages create an intentional process that brings together multiple community elements towards program solving and development efforts. The first stage, *Initiation*, focuses on recognizing, defining, and spreading awareness of the issue the community wants to address (Berardi et al., 2021). The *Organization of Sponsorship* stage involves gathering of resources to address community needs such as structures, organizations, and assets inside and outside of the community (Hernandez et al., 2022a). In the *Goal Setting and Strategy Development* stage, the community decides on goals to guide toward addressing the need, including developing targets and identifying strategies to achieve success (Hernandez et al., 2022b). In *Recruitment*, community members mobilize the people, money, materials, skills, and other resources to maximize impact and success of their action efforts (Hernandez et al., 2022c).

Lastly, through all the stages discussed in the community action process (Berardi & Brennan, 2020), but most directly witnessed during this *Implementation* stage, residents unite and work towards shared goals. In the community action process, channels of communication and interaction are established that cut across class and other lines. This is a remarkable achievement and represents community development. This process must be promoted and fostered on all possible occasions.

Building on the success achieved by this active group, the long-term process of achieving social change can begin. This long-term course of action will be characterized by numerous successes, as well as failures and setbacks. By producing a cohesive group of residents, a structure is in place that will operate proactively to positively shape local well-being. This group will also be able to respond to threats and emerging problems within the community. In the end this coordinated local capacity will contribute social and economic changes that benefit all community residents and groups.

## **Conclusion**

This work has demonstrated that local community action is not only central to shaping development outcomes, but is also foundational to sustaining social well-being, local identity, and democratic decision-making within communities. As responsibilities increasingly shift from government institutions to local actors, communities are confronted with complex challenges involving competing interests, limited resources, and diverse stakeholder perspectives. In this context, organized, intentional, and inclusive community action emerges as the most effective means through which residents can collectively respond to change, protect local quality of life, and guide development in ways that reflect shared values and needs.

At the heart of this process is the understanding that community does not exist merely as a collection of individuals, but rather as a dynamic network of social relationships built through interaction, shared purpose, and collective effort. The community action process described throughout this text illustrates how deliberate engagement across social, economic, and institutional boundaries fosters mutual understanding, builds trust, and increases the adaptive capacity of local residents. Through interaction, residents recognize common needs, identify assets, and develop the collective power necessary to influence decisions that shape their lives and environment.

The five stages of community action—initiation, organization of sponsorship, goal setting and strategy formulation, recruitment, and implementation—provide a practical and systematic framework for transforming concern into sustained action. Initiation lays the groundwork by raising awareness and creating opportunities for inclusive participation. Organization of sponsorship strengthens these early efforts by establishing group structure, partnerships, and access to resources. Goal setting ensures that action is guided by a shared vision rooted in both community needs and assets. Recruitment expands ownership of the process by mobilizing diverse residents and cultivating leadership. Finally, implementation transforms plans into tangible outcomes while reinforcing empowerment, accountability, and learning. Importantly, this framework does not romanticize community harmony or overlook conflict. Rather, it acknowledges that meaningful community development often arises from interaction among groups with differing perspectives and interests. It is through this interaction—when managed intentionally and inclusively—that communities are able to transcend individual or organizational self-interest and work toward the general well-being of the locality. Success, therefore, is not defined solely by the achievement of specific project outcomes, but by the establishment of enduring relationships, communication channels, and local capacity for collective problem-solving.

Ultimately, the community action process strengthens local self-determination. By retaining decision-making power within the community and grounding development efforts in local knowledge, experience, and values, communities are better equipped to respond proactively to both immediate challenges and long-term change. The result is a more resilient, engaged, and empowered community—one capable of shaping its own future rather than reacting to externally imposed solutions.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the principles and stages of community action outlined in this text, several key recommendations emerge for Extension professionals, policymakers, community leaders, and grassroots organizations seeking to foster effective and sustainable community development.

### **1. Prioritize Inclusive and Early Engagement**

Community action efforts should intentionally begin with inclusive initiation processes that reflect the diversity of the locality. Practitioners should actively identify and engage representatives from all major social fields, while also seeking out voices that are traditionally underrepresented in decision-making. Early inclusivity not only improves problem identification but also builds legitimacy, trust, and long-term commitment to action efforts.

### **2. Invest in Relationship-Building, Not Just Projects**

While addressing specific community issues is important, long-term success depends on building durable relationships across groups and organizations. Extension professionals and community leaders should design programs that emphasize interaction, dialogue, and collaboration, recognizing that these social ties are critical assets that extend beyond the lifespan of any single initiative.

### **3. Strengthen Organizational Structure and Shared Governance**

During the organization of sponsorship stage, careful attention should be given to group structure, decision-making processes, and power distribution. Transparent governance models that balance leadership with shared responsibility help foster trust, accountability, and sustained participation. Communities should be supported in developing flexible structures that can adapt as goals evolve and participation expands.

#### **4. Ground Goals in Both Needs and Assets**

Effective goal setting should combine needs assessments with asset mapping to avoid deficit-based approaches. Recognizing local skills, knowledge, networks, and resources empowers residents and promotes solutions that are context-specific and sustainable. Goals should be measurable, achievable, and clearly linked to the broader vision of community well-being.

#### **5. Expand Recruitment and Leadership Development**

Recruitment efforts should be ongoing and proactive, extending beyond familiar leaders to include new participants with diverse experiences and capacities. Creating multiple entry points for involvement—through subgroups, committees, and short-term tasks—can lower barriers to participation and cultivate emerging leadership across the community.

#### **6. Embed Evaluation and Learning into Implementation**

Implementation should be treated as an iterative learning process rather than a final endpoint. Establishing benchmarks, celebrating successes, reflecting on failures, and adjusting strategies are essential for maintaining momentum and improving outcomes. Formal opportunities for evaluation and feedback should be built into all action efforts to support continuous improvement.

#### **7. Support Long-Term Capacity Building**

Finally, community action should be framed as an ongoing process rather than a one-time intervention. Policymakers and supporting institutions should invest in long-term capacity building by providing technical assistance, leadership training, and flexible funding that enables communities to respond to emerging challenges and opportunities over time.

Together, these recommendations reinforce the central conclusion of this work: when local residents are intentionally organized, inclusively engaged, and empowered through a structured action process, communities gain the capacity to shape development in ways that enhance social, economic, and civic well-being for all.

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# Developing Intercultural Competence through Project-Based Learning in Higher Education

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## **Introduction**

The internationalization of higher education has created new demands for pedagogical approaches that prepare students to engage effectively in culturally diverse environments. Intercultural competence, understood as the ability to communicate, collaborate, and build relationships across cultural differences, has become a central learning outcome for universities worldwide (UNESCO, 2020). Yet, research shows that students often encounter challenges in multicultural teamwork, such as language barriers, uneven participation, and cultural misunderstandings (Jiang et al., 2023). These challenges highlight the need for intentional pedagogical strategies that foster intercultural communication, empathy, and adaptability skills.

Project-Based Learning (PBL) methodology has been widely recognized as a powerful framework to address these needs. With its historical roots in experiential and constructivist traditions, PBL emphasises authentic tasks, collaboration, student agency (Hanney, 2018), group composition and assessment design (Chen & Yang, 2019). To illustrate, in media and communication studies, PBL has been shown to integrate curricular content with creative production, enhancing both technical and transversal competencies (López-González et al., 2023; Ling et al., 2024).

The relationship between PBL and intercultural competence has been explored in diverse contexts. Studies demonstrate that project-based teamwork in multicultural groups fosters tolerance, empathy, and intercultural communication skills (Švejdarová, 2020). Interventions in engineering education show that structured PBL activities can advance students' ability to negotiate meaning, manage diversity, and develop learner agency (Ergai et al., 2023; Jiang et al., 2023). In agile team settings, PBL has been found to promote adaptability and recognition of diversity as valuable learning outcomes (Švejdarová, 2020). These findings align with broader frameworks of intercultural competence, which emphasize the interplay of cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions (UNESCO, 2020).

From a critical and inclusive pedagogical perspective, it is essential to recognize that education is never neutral, but always embedded in social, political, and ethical commitments. As Arandia-Loroño (2004) explains, drawing on Freire's legacy, dialogic and horizontal practices are indispensable for fostering critical consciousness and empowering learners as agents of transformation. In the same vein, Giroux (2016) argues that critical pedagogy is not simply a methodology but a moral and political project that challenges inequalities and cultivates democratic participation. More recently, Allan (2023) highlights that inclusive education requires moving beyond superficial adaptations, embracing diversity as a resource for change, and ensuring that all voices, particularly those historically marginalized, are recognized in the co-construction of knowledge.

Beyond technical and intercultural skills, PBL also contributes to emotional and values-based learning. Research in higher education highlights the role of project work in cultivating empathy, responsibility, and ethical awareness, particularly in communication and media studies (Franganillo et al., 2021). In this line, student participation and voice are likewise central to transformative educational

experiences, reinforcing democratic values and a sense of belonging (Bernad-Vicente & Coma-Roselló, 2025).

The present research studies the perceptions of participants in the Transilvania Creative Camp (TCC 2025), the fourth edition of a blended intensive programme organized by the Faculty of Sociology and Communication at Transilvania University of Braşov. Held in Târgu Lăpuş and surrounding villages in Lăpuş Country between 22 and 28 August 2025, the camp brought together 32 students of 11 nationalities from nine universities, alongside local high school pupils and professors from partner institutions in Europe. For one week, participants engaged in courses, creative workshops, and field activities designed to explore and promote the region's cultural heritage, traditions, gastronomy, crafts, and natural environment. Working in mixed intercultural teams, students collected data through interviews, observation, and audiovisual production, later transforming these materials into films, leaflets, and digital content aimed at promoting sustainable tourism and community development. This unique combination of academic, professional, and community-based learning provides a rich context to investigate how PBL fosters intercultural competence, teamwork, and the transfer of learning in higher education.

## **Methodology**

This study is guided by the following research question: *How do participants in the TCC 2025 programme perceive its contribution to the development of intercultural, social, and professional skills, and to the transfer of learning across contexts?* To address this question, a qualitative case study was conducted with the general objective of exploring how participants in the TCC 2025 programme perceive the impact of its methodology and activities on the development of intercultural, social, and professional skills, as well as on the transfer of learning to other academic, professional, and intercultural contexts.

The chosen paradigm in social research is interpretative because it involves qualitative research that seeks to understand phenomena (González Monteagudo, 2009). Emergence is one of the fundamental characteristics of any qualitative research design because it is constantly adjusting to the reality of the research. Emergent designs must be adapted to the type of understanding, relating the researcher's reflexivity both in the design of the project itself and throughout the fieldwork and subsequent analysis (Cuesta-Benjumea, 2011). The chosen approach is grounded theory (Creswell and Poth, 2016) because it focuses on developing a theory based on data collected from the educational field from the perspectives and views of the participants themselves. In this case, the unit of analysis is the action and interaction of students, teachers and local agents in Târgu Lăpuș immersed in the Transilvania Creative Camp Blended Intensive Programme (BIP). The selected design uses the case study strategy because it studies a contemporary phenomenon in its real context (Yin, 1981).

### **Data collection**

The information was collected using a self-administered ad hoc questionnaire in Google Forms, which was sent to participants one week after the end of the project via the WhatsApp group. The questionnaire begins with demographic data relating to gender, age and university of origin. The questionnaire consists of five open-ended questions organised into three blocks (Table 1). All questions are mandatory except for the last one.

**Table 1***Ad hoc questionnaire*

Theme blocks		Questions	
<b>A.</b>	Experience and methodology	<b>1.</b>	How would you describe the types of activities conducted during TCC?
		<b>2.</b>	In relation to the visits and interaction with local communities, which aspects enhanced your intercultural understanding and teamwork skills?
<b>B.</b>	Competencies and transfer	<b>3.</b>	Think about the competencies and skills promoted during the week. Which ones developed the most in you and how did they manifest in your practice?
		<b>4.</b>	Which specific moment or activity from TCC 2025 best enabled you to put the knowledge and skills you acquired into practice in other contexts, and why?
<b>C.</b>	Final coments	<b>5.</b>	Do you have any additional comments?

Note. *Own elaboration.*

### Data analysis

For this research, data analysis took shape through grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Trinidad et al., 2006; Andréu et al., 2007) and the constant comparative method. The process began with the incidents (the data), which for this project were the responses to the questionnaire. First, open coding was developed, in which the researcher ‘let himself go,’ opening himself up to inquiry in order to make an initial categorisation by reading all the data in its entirety. Secondly, selective axial coding was conducted, the purpose of which was to bring out categories from the initial set of categories. Finally, in the third phase,

called theoretical axial coding, the definitive central categories emerged, which provided a better explanation of the research problem.

## **Participants**

The broader TCC 2025 cohort comprised 32 participants: 23 were international, two were enrolled at UNITBV and seven were affiliated with local secondary education institutions. This chapter's sample comprised 16 participants, representing 50% of the broader cohort. Of these, 56.3% were female and 43.8% were male. The age distribution was dominated by the 20–24 age group (50%), followed by the 25–29, 15–19 and 50–54 age groups (each 12.5%), and the 30–34 and 45–49 age groups (each 6.3%). Institutional origins were diverse: 18.8% participants were affiliated with the University of Zaragoza, and a further 18.8 per cent with Dunaújváros University. Four institutions (Transilvania University of Braşov, Savoie Mont Blanc University, Stuttgart Media University, and the “Petru Rareş” Theoretical High School) each contributed 12.5%, while the Polytechnic Institute of Guarda and the University of Turin each accounted for 6.3%. The sample was university students (87.5%), with a smaller proportion from secondary education (12.5%). This allows the analysis to capture a range of institutional contexts and age cohorts.

## **Results**

The data obtained has been categorised into five thematic dimensions. Table 2 below shows these dimensions and categories with their definitions and examples, before going on to describe each of them in more detail.

**Table 2***Dimensions and categories with definitions and examples*

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Category definition</b>	<b>Example</b>
<b>Description of activities</b>	Unanticipated activities	Activities whose format or unfolding was not anticipated by participants	“The activities were really interesting and unexpected every time.”
	Funny and interesting activities	Activities perceived as playful, attractive, engaging, or enjoyable	“I would describe them as fun and interesting activities.”
	Local community experience	Lived experiences with local communities (visits, stays, participation)	“Visit, experience and live very similar to the local people.”
	Practical, profession related	Activities related to professional or practical skills (e.g., recording, interviewing)	“Partly profession related, cause I made a lot of video records.”
<b>Interaction and interculturality</b>	Anthropological experience	Fieldwork, interviews, participant observation with local communities	“When we had to go on different villages without the professor.”
	Intercultural communication skills	Improvement in intercultural communication; roles of translation and English as lingua franca	“As a Romanian, having to translate.”

Dimension	Category	Category definition	Example
	Empathy and interacting with locals	Development of empathy, active listening, rapport and interpersonal connection with locals	“Interaction with the locals allowed a better understanding and identification with other people's cultures.”
	Transversal intercultural understanding	Understanding of cultural similarities and differences applied across the project	“Understanding how different the European culture can be but also how close related the traditions are.”
	Adaptability to unexpected situations	Capacity to adjust to changes, improvise and manage surprises during activities	“To adapt in every unexpected situation.”
	Positive recognition of diversity	Explicit observation and acknowledgment of cultural diversity among participants and communities	“Though we all came from different backgrounds and cultures, we all were able to understand each other.”
<b>Competencies developed</b>	Social skills	Interpersonal skills such as patience, tolerance and empathy	“Patience, empathy, understand and tolerate different approaches.”
	Team work skills	Abilities to coordinate, collaborate and fulfill roles within group work	“I am used to work by myself so this experience allowed me to develop more teamwork skill.”

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Category definition</b>	<b>Example</b>
	Media production skills	Technical skills in audiovisual production: shooting, photography, drone use, basic editing	“All the drone shots. Getting better each day.”
<b>Transfer and key moments</b>	Teamwork project presentations	Moments linked to group deliverables: flyer design, presentations, deadlines and coordination	“Designing the final presentations. Working under a strict deadline.”
	Professor workshops	Teacher-led technical sessions that enabled applied learning	“The explanation about the triangle in photography helped me making better pictures.”
<b>Overall appraisal and effects</b>	Sense of belonging	Feeling of belonging and unity among participants	“To keep and develop our unit between all of the European Countries.”
	General satisfaction and enjoyment	Global positive evaluation and desire to repeat the experience	“It was an awesome experience with impact to my live that will last a very long time.”

Note. Own elaboration.

In the *Description of activities* dimension, participants referred to several distinct categories. The category *Unanticipated activities* highlights moments whose unfolding was not foreseen, as when one participant explained that “each day we woke up having a general idea of what was going to happen but not really the way of it.” The category *Funny and interesting activities* reflects the playful and engaging character of many tasks, illustrated by the simple phrase “I would describe them as fun and interesting activities.” The category *Local community experience* points to direct encounters with local people, for example in the statement “We received a task we needed to ask locals to let us in their home and we made video films.” Finally, the category *Practical, profession related* captures activities linked to vocational skills, such as the remark “The further work with producing media und first steps with a drone helped me to get more self-consciousness in the act of producing.”

Turning to the *Interaction and interculturality* dimension, the category *Anthropological experience* refers to fieldwork and village visits, exemplified by the fragment “we had to go on different villages without the professor [...], I believe that that episode alone enhanced our abilities” The category *Intercultural communication skills* emphasizes the role of English and translation, as when a participant noted “My intercultural understanding was enhanced when I translated from Romanian into English to help international students communicate with the locals.” The category *Empathy and interacting with locals* reflects the development of rapport and understanding, captured in the phrase “Interaction with the locals allowed a better understanding and identification with other people's cultures.” The category *Transversal intercultural understanding* points to broader cultural insights across the project, as in “The intercultural aspect was developed from moment 1 when we started socializing between us.” The category *Adaptability to unexpected situations* highlights the ability to adjust, with the literal expression “to adapt in every unexpected situation.” Finally, the category *Positive recognition of*

*diversity* shows explicit acknowledgement of plurality, as in the brief reference to “Understanding how different the European culture can be but also how closely related the traditions are. Though we all came from different backgrounds and cultures [...].”

In the *Competencies developed* dimension, the category *Social skills* denotes interpersonal capacities such as patience and tolerance, illustrated by the fragment “The strong hospitality what I experienced. It helps to me understand and tolerate other people in the daily life.” The category *Team work skills* refers to collaborative abilities, as one participant explained: “I am used to work by myself, so this experience allowed me to develop more team work skill.” The category *Media production skills* captures technical learning in audiovisual production, exemplified by “All the drone shots. Getting better each day.”

The *Transfer and key moments* dimension includes two categories. The category *Teamwork project presentations* refers to group deliverables and deadlines, as in the statement “The most valuable moment was when we put all the pieces together for the final creative project.” The category *Professor workshops* highlights teacher-led sessions that supported applied learning, illustrated by “the explanation of [...] about the triangle in photography helped me making better pictures.”

Finally, the *Overall appraisal and effects* dimension brings together participants’ global evaluations. The category *Sense of belonging* reflects feelings of unity, as in the response “It was amazing experience for me... the most important the unite between us what we experienced.” The category *General satisfaction and enjoyment* conveys positive evaluation and willingness to repeat the experience, captured in the statement “I really enjoyed this camp and hope to have another experience like it in the future.”

## Discussion and Conclusions

The findings of this study provide rich insights into how participants in the Transilvania Creative Camp (TCC) 2025 experienced project-based learning (PBL) in an intercultural higher education context. The five thematic dimensions identified; description of activities, interaction and interculturality, competencies developed, transfer and key moments, and overall appraisal; illustrate the multifaceted nature of learning in such environments.

The dimension *Description of activities* highlights the dual character of PBL as both structured and open-ended. Participants valued unanticipated and playful activities, which aligns with Hanney's (2018) argument that PBL fosters creativity and adaptability through authentic, unpredictable tasks. Encounters with local communities and profession-related activities further illustrate how PBL bridges academic learning with vocational and civic engagement (López-González et al., 2023; Ling et al., 2024).

The dimension *Interaction and interculturality* underscores the centrality of intercultural competence. Students reported gains in communication skills, empathy, and adaptability, echoing UNESCO's (2020) emphasis on intercultural competence as a combination of cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions. The recognition of diversity and the ability to navigate unexpected situations resonate with Švejdarová's (2020) findings on agile PBL teams.

The dimension *Competencies developed* shows that PBL supports both technical and transversal skills. Participants reported improvements in teamwork, social skills, and media production, reflecting the dual emphasis on professional and interpersonal development found in previous studies (Chen & Yang, 2019; Ergai et al., 2023).

The dimension *Transfer and key moments* highlights the importance of scaffolding and facilitation. Team project presentations and professor-led workshops were identified as pivotal learning moments, supporting the argument that effective PBL requires a balance between student autonomy and structured guidance (Hanney, 2018; Chen & Yang, 2019). The findings also suggest that the transfer of learning is most evident when students are challenged to apply their knowledge to produce tangible results within realistic constraints.

Finally, the Overall Appraisal and Effects dimension reveals the programme's affective and communal outcomes. The strong sense of belonging and general satisfaction expressed by participants is consistent with the emphasis placed by Bernad-Vicente and Coma-Roselló (2025) on student voice and participation as the foundations of transformative education. The affective dimension of belonging also resonates with Freire's (Arandia-Loroño, 2004) call for dialogical and horizontal learning spaces where students experience themselves as co-creators of knowledge.

The results also illustrate how PBL can embody the principles of critical and inclusive pedagogy in intercultural contexts. As Giroux (2016) argues, pedagogy is never neutral, but rather a political and ethical endeavour. By engaging students in collaborative projects with local communities, the TCC 2025 experience challenged them to confront cultural differences, negotiate meaning and recognise diversity as a resource rather than a barrier. This approach is consistent with Allan's (2023) assertion that inclusion necessitates moving beyond mere superficial adaptations and embracing diversity as a source of change. Participants' reflections on empathy, tolerance and belonging suggest that the camp fostered *conscientização*, as described by Freire (Arandia-Loroño, 2004): the development of critical awareness through dialogue and praxis.

These findings have several implications for higher education. Firstly, they suggest that PBL is an effective methodology for developing intercultural competence, particularly when it is embedded in authentic, community-based contexts. Secondly, they emphasise the importance of incorporating emotional and values-based learning into curricula, as these aspects are crucial for fostering students' sense of belonging and civic responsibility. Thirdly, they suggest that critical and inclusive pedagogical frameworks can enhance PBL by ensuring that diversity is acknowledged and leveraged to facilitate transformative learning.

As this is a case study, the focus on a single intensive programme with a relatively small number of participants limits the scope of the study. While the findings provide valuable insights, they may not be generalizable to all intercultural PBL contexts. Future research could adopt longitudinal designs to examine how competencies developed in such programmes are transferred into students' academic and professional trajectories. Comparative studies across different blended intensive programmes could also shed light on contextual factors that shape outcomes.

In conclusion, the TCC 2025 case study demonstrates how project-based learning can cultivate intercultural and transversal skills, as well as a sense of belonging, within higher education. By placing learning within authentic, intercultural and community-based contexts, the programme enabled students to develop soft skills. These outcomes align with the principles of critical and inclusive pedagogy, which emphasise that education should be dialogic, transformative and socially just (Arandia-Loroño, 2004; Giroux, 2016; Allan, 2023). Such approaches can equip students with the skills needed to live and participate responsibly and democratically in a globalised world.

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**DECLARATION OD USE OF AI:** AI tools have been used to help with the translation of the text from Spanish into English, and then to revise it.

# Empathic Teaching as a Catalyst for Student Engagement and Wellbeing

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## **Introduction**

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, teaching extends beyond the transmission of linguistic forms to the creation of meaningful opportunities for communication. Because learners often have limited exposure to English outside the classroom, the teacher plays a crucial role in designing learning experiences that simulate authentic social interaction. This requires a careful combination of teaching methods that address linguistic competence, communicative ability, and socio-emotional engagement simultaneously. Within this context, teaching with empathy becomes particularly significant, as it enables teachers to understand learners' emotional, cultural, and cognitive needs and to respond with pedagogical strategies that foster participation, confidence, and interaction.

Communicative language teaching and task-based learning emphasize the importance of using language for real purposes, yet these approaches are most effective when learners feel emotionally safe and motivated to take risks. Empathic teachers are better positioned to create such environments, as they are attentive to learners' anxieties, diverse backgrounds, and varying levels of confidence. By recognizing these factors, teachers can adapt instruction, scaffold interaction, and select activities that encourage students to express themselves without fear of negative evaluation. In this sense, empathy supports not only interpersonal relationships but also the successful implementation of communicative methodologies in the EFL classroom.

To promote genuine communication, EFL teachers often need to place students in real-life or life-like situations where language is used as a social tool rather than as an abstract system. Role-plays, simulations, problem-solving tasks, and collaborative projects allow learners to negotiate meaning, make decisions, and co-construct knowledge in English. However, engaging students in such activities requires sensitivity to learners' emotional readiness, group dynamics, and individual differences. Empathic teaching helps teachers anticipate potential barriers—such as anxiety, reluctance to speak, or fear of making mistakes—and address them through supportive guidance and flexible task design.

### **Theoretical Background: Teaching with Empathy**

Teaching with empathy has gained increasing attention in educational research as scholars seek to understand how relational and emotional dimensions of teaching influence learning, engagement, and student wellbeing. Empathy in education is commonly understood as a multidimensional construct that includes affective responsiveness (the ability to emotionally resonate with others), cognitive perspective-taking (the ability to understand another person's viewpoint), and empathic action (the capacity to respond appropriately to perceived needs). When enacted in pedagogical contexts, empathy becomes not only an interpersonal skill but a guiding principle shaping classroom interactions, instructional decisions, and educational values.

One of the most influential theoretical foundations for empathic teaching is the ethic of care, most notably articulated by Nel Noddings. According to Noddings (1984, 2012), education is fundamentally a moral and relational practice rather than a purely technical enterprise. From this perspective, caring relationships between teachers and students are not incidental to learning but constitute its ethical core. Empathy plays a central role in the caring relation, as it enables teachers to attend

receptively to students' experiences and respond in ways that affirm students' dignity and individuality. Noddings argues that when students feel genuinely cared for, they are more likely to engage meaningfully with learning and to develop moral and social responsibility themselves. Thus, empathic teaching is framed as both an ethical obligation and a pedagogical necessity.

A complementary framework emerges from social and emotional learning (SEL) and the literature on emotional intelligence. SEL conceptualizes empathy as a learnable and teachable competency that supports academic success and positive social functioning. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) identifies empathy as a core element of social awareness, alongside skills such as perspective-taking, respect for diversity, and understanding social norms (CASEL, n.d.). Within this framework, teachers are not only expected to model empathy but also to create structured opportunities for students to develop empathic skills through discussion, reflection, cooperative learning, and explicit instruction. Research syntheses indicate that SEL programs that emphasize empathy and relational skills are associated with improvements in students' social behavior, emotional regulation, and academic outcomes, suggesting that empathy contributes indirectly to learning by strengthening classroom climate and relationships. Empirical research further supports the importance of empathy in teaching effectiveness. Systematic reviews and meta-analyses demonstrate consistent associations between teacher empathy, high-quality teacher–student relationships, and positive student outcomes. Aldrup et al. (2022), for example, highlight that teachers who demonstrate empathic understanding tend to experience fewer classroom disruptions, higher levels of student engagement, and more positive emotional climates. Similarly, studies in language education contexts show that teacher empathy is linked to increased learner motivation, willingness to participate, and emotional engagement (Zhang, 2022). These findings suggest that

empathy functions as a relational mechanism through which instructional practices become more responsive to learners' needs.

However, scholars also emphasize the importance of conceptual clarity. Empathy is sometimes used interchangeably with related constructs such as sympathy, compassion, or warmth, leading to theoretical ambiguity. Contemporary models therefore stress the need to distinguish between affective empathy (emotional resonance), cognitive empathy (perspective-taking), and behavioral or action-oriented components (Zaki, 2014). For the purposes of educational theory, this distinction is crucial: effective empathic teaching does not require emotional over-identification with students but rather an informed, reflective understanding that guides pedagogical responses. Defining empathy explicitly allows researchers and practitioners to align theory, measurement, and classroom practice more coherently.

Another significant strand of literature connecting empathy and pedagogy is trauma-informed education. Trauma-informed approaches recognize that many learners experience adverse life events that affect attention, emotional regulation, and behavior. In this context, empathy is not framed as optional or idealistic but as essential for equitable teaching. Trauma-informed frameworks emphasize the creation of safe, predictable, and supportive learning environments in which teachers use empathic understanding to interpret behavior, de-escalate conflict, and avoid re-traumatization (Avery et al., 2020). Empathy enables teachers to shift from deficit-based interpretations of student behavior toward more contextualized and compassionate responses, thereby supporting both learning and wellbeing.

Importantly, trauma-informed and empathic teaching approaches also draw attention to teacher wellbeing and professional boundaries. While empathy is associated with positive relational outcomes, excessive emotional labor without adequate institutional support can contribute to stress and burnout. Scholars

caution that sustainable empathic practice requires professional training, collegial support, and organizational structures that value emotional work as part of teaching (Aldrup et al., 2022). From a theoretical standpoint, this underscores that empathy should be understood not merely as an individual teacher trait but as a practice embedded within broader educational systems and cultures.

Synthesizing these perspectives, teaching with empathy can be conceptualized as a multidimensional pedagogical orientation grounded in care ethics, operationalized through social-emotional competencies, and justified by empirical evidence on engagement, inclusion, and trauma-sensitive practice. The ethic of care provides the moral rationale for prioritizing relationships; SEL offers practical and instructional frameworks for cultivating empathy; and trauma-informed pedagogy highlights empathy's role in promoting equity and access to learning. Together, these theoretical strands position empathy as a foundational element of effective, humane, and responsive education.

In sum, the theoretical literature suggests that empathy in teaching is best understood as an intentional, reflective practice that integrates emotional understanding with pedagogical action. Rather than detracting from academic rigor, empathic teaching supports learning by fostering trust, motivation, and psychological safety. As educational contexts become increasingly diverse and complex, empathy emerges not as a soft skill but as a core professional competence that underpins both ethical teaching and effective learning.

### **Impact of Empathic Teaching on Students**

Research increasingly shows that empathic teaching practices exert significant and multifaceted impacts on students' emotional, social, and academic development. While the pathways of influence are complex and not always linear, a growing body of educational psychology and empirical studies demonstrates that students who

experience empathic educators tend to flourish in environments characterized by emotional safety, engagement, and psychological wellbeing.

One of the most consistently documented effects of teacher empathy is on student mental health and emotional wellbeing. Recent research using structural equation modeling indicates that higher levels of perceived teacher empathy are associated with lower levels of student stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms, suggesting that empathy serves a *protective role* in buffering against emotional distress (Frontiers research, 2025). This study further found that student engagement mediates the relationship between teacher empathy and mental health outcomes, meaning that empathetic teaching not only directly alleviates negative mental states but also fosters engagement that, in turn, supports emotional wellbeing.

Empathy also significantly impacts student engagement in learning. Multiple studies across diverse educational contexts, including language learning settings, confirm a positive relationship between teacher empathy and students' active participation and motivation. For example, research in English language classrooms indicates that empathetic teacher-learner rapport helps reduce student stress and enhances motivation and engagement in learning tasks, thereby contributing to better academic interactions and classroom involvement.

Beyond emotional and engagement effects, teacher empathy contributes to students' social and relational development. Studies show that when teachers consistently demonstrate understanding and responsiveness, students are more likely to exhibit prosocial behaviors such as cooperation, inclusive interactions with peers, and resilience in social contexts. These effects are especially pronounced when empathy is cultivated through intentional practices such as SEL seminars, mindfulness exercises, and empathy training programs, which have shown improvements in students' emotional wellbeing and motivation across educational levels.

Empathy also plays a role in student satisfaction with the educational experience and self-perceptions of achievement. Research focusing on teacher emotional intelligence finds that students report higher levels of satisfaction with their learning when teachers demonstrate empathetic communication and social support. In these cases, empathy acts as an emotional support system that enhances students' sense of belonging, reduces anxiety, and fosters a more positive appraisal of their academic performance.

Classroom climate and social outcomes are also influenced by empathic teaching. Empathy training for teachers has been associated with reductions in bullying and improvements in classroom social dynamics. One intervention study demonstrates that empathy-based programs involving teachers significantly reduced bullying behaviors among young pupils, suggesting that empathic presence and modeling not only support individual students emotionally but also contribute to a more positive and cooperative social environment.

Despite these positive impacts, research also highlights important nuances and limitations. A systematic review of empathy's role in teaching found that while teacher empathy is theorized to support positive student outcomes, the empirical evidence is mixed—particularly regarding direct effects on academic achievement as measured by test scores or grades. Some studies show weak or inconsistent effects of teacher empathy on cognitive outcomes, possibly because academic achievement is influenced by multiple distal factors beyond interpersonal relationships alone.

However, the proximal effects of empathy on psychosocial outcomes—such as student engagement, emotional support, and teacher–student interaction quality—are more consistently positive in the literature. Emotional support from teachers, closely related to empathetic behavior, correlates strongly with students'

intrinsic motivation, participation, and psychological satisfaction, which are themselves linked to long-term academic persistence.

Taken together, this body of research indicates that empathic teaching influences students through multiple channels: by creating emotionally supportive classroom climates that reduce distress; by enhancing engagement, motivation, and participation; by fostering social skills and prosocial behavior; and by reinforcing students' sense of satisfaction and belonging in school. While direct links to academic achievement require further clarification, the evidence strongly supports empathy as a catalyst for holistic student development.

In summary, the current research suggests that empathic teaching benefits students not only academically but also emotionally and socially. Empathy creates a relationally rich teaching environment that increases student engagement and wellbeing, supports positive social climates, and helps students feel understood and valued, factors that are foundational to meaningful learning experiences.

### **Engaging in project Work – Transilvania Creative Camp**

Project work, in particular, offers a powerful context for combining language learning with real-world relevance. Projects typically involve collaboration, sustained inquiry, and the production of tangible outcomes, all of which mirror authentic social practices. When guided by empathic teaching, project-based learning enables students to connect language use with personal interests, social issues, and real-life experiences. Teachers who adopt an empathic stance can mediate group processes, validate students' voices, and ensure that projects remain inclusive and motivating for all learners. As a result, students are more likely to engage deeply, take ownership of their learning, and develop both linguistic competence and social skills.

As teachers of English as a foreign language our goal is to be able to replicate a real life situation in class which remains many times only an attempt. Thus, when participating in camps is offered to the students, the teacher responds enthusiastically although students need to be persuaded. What the teacher sees is the opportunity to interact with people of different nationalities whose common language is English, in short, the teacher foresees the students' meeting with the real world.

Transilvania Creative Camp was one of these incredible opportunities for students learning in a small town high school. Year after year with every camp, the students were engaged in a myriad of activities that forced them to talk about things they never thought they would, to mediate communication with local people on subjects they found unknown even though they are locals. The students realised how important it was for them to understand and, at the same time, to be able to transmit the information correctly since everything was to become a research of their community. They passed from one emotion to another while they were trying to understand the tasks. While at the beginning they thought they were merely observers of the others' research and their only job was to go along, they realised very soon that they had the most difficult task and that was to connect people who were not talking the same language. This brought a lot of pressure as they suddenly understood the importance of their work. They realised that they were that vital link between the researchers and their subjects. And so, they did what was expected of them and succeeding in doing so made them realise how much you can do even though you think you can't. At the end they were sure of themselves, they had gained confidence, they were able to communicate better and more fluently. Being able to do a task that in the beginning seemed almost impossible had made them feel proud of themselves and that was obvious in their attitude.

## Conclusion

Teaching with empathy ultimately invites us to reconsider what it means to teach a foreign language. Beyond grammar, vocabulary, and assessment, EFL classrooms are spaces where learners negotiate identity, confidence, and belonging through a language that is not their own. Throughout this article, empathy has emerged not as a soft or secondary element of teaching, but as a central force that allows communicative methods, real-life tasks, and project work to function meaningfully. When students feel understood and supported, they are more willing to take risks, engage in interaction, and use English as a genuine tool for communication rather than as a school subject detached from real life.

From a teacher's perspective, empathic teaching is also a reflective and adaptive practice. It requires attentiveness to students' emotional states, sensitivity to group dynamics, and a willingness to adjust methods in response to learners' needs. Project-based and communicative activities demand more than careful planning; they demand trust, patience, and the ability to see students as individuals with unique experiences and voices. Empathy enables teachers to guide students through uncertainty, to transform hesitation into participation, and to create learning environments in which mistakes are viewed as part of growth rather than as failure.

Finally, teaching with empathy reminds us that language learning is, at its core, a social act. When EFL classrooms reflect real-life interaction through collaboration, shared problem-solving, and meaningful projects, students develop not only linguistic competence but also confidence, agency, and human connection. Empathy allows teachers to bridge the gap between method and meaning, ensuring that language education remains both academically rigorous and deeply human. In this way, empathic teaching does not merely support learning outcomes; it shapes experiences that students carry with them long after they leave the classroom.

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# **Transilvania Creative Camp 2025 as a Unique Multilevel Opportunity for Developing Intercultural Communication Competences – A Pedagogical Self-Reflection**

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## **Introduction**

In the context of increasing internationalization of higher education, the development of intercultural and media competences has become one of the key challenges faced by contemporary universities. Educational initiatives that combine international collaboration, experiential learning, and project-based work create particularly favourable conditions for fostering these competences. Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs), implemented within the Erasmus+ framework, represent an innovative response to these needs by integrating virtual cooperation with short-term physical mobility and intensive intercultural interaction. This article reflects on the Transilvania Creative Camp 2025 as a case study of such a programme, focusing on the ways in which intercultural learning and media competence development were facilitated through direct cultural experience, teamwork in culturally diverse groups, and the creative translation of local cultural heritage into media outputs.

Methodologically, this text is grounded in participant observation, as the authors took part in all stages of the Blended Intensive Programme Transilvania Creative Camp 2025 as academic teachers and facilitators. This dual role enabled close, long-

term observation of students' interactions, learning processes, and intercultural encounters in both formal and informal educational settings. The analysis is further informed by a reflexive qualitative approach, understood here as systematic pedagogical self-reflection based on field notes, informal conversations, and the authors' ongoing interpretation of shared experiences within the intercultural group. This combination of participant observation and reflexive pedagogical analysis allows for an in-depth understanding of how intercultural and media competences are developed through experiential, collaborative, and culturally embedded learning practices.

### **Multilevel Intercultural Learning in a Blended Intensive Programme**

Taking part in Transilvania Creative Camp 2025 was, for us as university teachers specializing in intercultural and media communication, a wonderful opportunity for intercultural interaction, a great adventure, a chance to visit beautiful regions of Romania, and an occasion to bring together a group of students and academic staff from various European universities. It was also an opportunity to observe an interesting model through which university students develop their intercultural and media competences. This process took place during the Blended Intensive Programme on several levels:

1. We learned a great deal about Romanian culture and the history of this beautiful country. We had the chance not only to listen to fascinating stories about churches and local towns, but also to benefit from the knowledge of wonderful guides who shared insights about the culture of the region and of the country.
2. We met representatives of the culture we were getting to know. The time dedicated to intercultural interaction was invaluable, giving us direct contact with people representing local communities.

3. We experienced cultural presentations—music, dance, singing, cuisine—prepared for us with joy and in beautiful traditional costumes by members of these communities.
4. We met with representatives of national minorities forming part of Romanian society (e.g., the Hungarian community), and we also learned about those who once contributed to this society through stories told at the Jewish cemetery.
5. As an intercultural group—the participants of the Blended Intensive Programme Transilvania Creative Camp 2025 represented Romania, Hungary, Spain, France, Germany, and Poland—we spent time together working in teams as well as socializing. This was an excellent opportunity to enhance our intercultural competences. Joint project work in culturally mixed groups was particularly challenging. Working under pressure and with clear goals, students had to confront cultural differences and overcome the challenges that arose from them.
6. The goal of the project teams was to present selected aspects of the local culture through media. Translating what we had seen and experienced into media outputs—photos, videos, texts—was a very valuable exercise that required thoughtful reflection on our cultural experiences. Students had to consider questions such as: *How can we show cultural richness while maintaining the promotional quality of the media content we produce?*

In short, we learned what culture is and what cultural differences are in a highly engaging, well-organized, multilevel, and effective way. The openness of the TCC 2025 participants certainly supported this process, as everyone was eager both to interact interculturally and to talk about culture and communication between cultures.

TCC 2025 was an exceptionally intense experience. We absorbed Romania and its cultural richness with all our senses. It was a time of joy and beautiful, well-planned trips, as well as a time of intensive formal and informal learning—lectures, workshops, outdoor activities, and classes held outside traditional classrooms, in beautiful interiors and surrounded by nature.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the Transilvania Creative Camp 2025 demonstrated the significant educational potential of Blended Intensive Programmes as spaces for meaningful intercultural and media learning. Through intensive teamwork in culturally diverse groups and the creative mediation of local culture into various media forms, participants were able to confront cultural differences, negotiate meanings, and develop a deeper awareness of both their own and others' cultural perspectives. The combination of experiential learning, direct contact with local communities, and reflective project work proved to be particularly effective in fostering intercultural competences that extend beyond formal curricular outcomes. As such, TCC 2025 can be viewed as a valuable model of international academic cooperation, illustrating how well-designed, immersive educational initiatives can contribute to the holistic development of students and academic staff in an increasingly intercultural and media-driven world.

We were warmly welcomed in Târgu Lăpuş and excellently guided by the main organizer of TCC 2025, Prof. Florin Nechita. Our stay left us with beautiful memories, new relationships and friendships, professionally prepared promotional materials created by the project teams, and numerous photographs that help us return in our minds to sunny Romania in August 2025. And we also gained—perhaps without fully realizing it—intercultural competences. Each participant returned home with greater experience in this area, which we will certainly use in our studies, our professional work, and future travels.

We would like to express our gratitude to the organizers of TCC 2025 and to all the wonderful and exceptionally hospitable Romanians who welcomed us with openness and a smile, sharing their knowledge and skills.

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# **Bridging Sustainable Academic-Rural Entrepreneurship: Insights from Transilvania Creative Camp 2025**

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## **Introduction**

Promoting sustainable development and addressing regional disparities in Europe requires a deliberate and inclusive approach to knowledge transfer, connecting academic research and rural entrepreneurial ecosystems. In this context, the intersection of universities and local communities emerges as a fertile ground for innovation, particularly when cultural heritage, agriculture, and nature-based tourism are leveraged as catalysts for growth.

In August 2025, the Transilvania Creative Camp (TCC) brought this vision to life. Set in the Maramureş region of Romania, the initiative assembled 25 students from 11 universities worldwide in a multidisciplinary, multi-institutional collaboration. Guided by the Department of Social Sciences and Communication of the University of Brasov, the program focuses on organizational knowledge transfer and innovation ecosystems. The camp partnered with local stakeholders to co-create solutions for regional challenges in tourism, gastronomy, crafts, and sustainable entrepreneurship.

This chapter presents a case study based on the outcomes of the TCC, enriched by relevant literature and experiential insights. It aims to identify and analyze best practices in academic knowledge transmission, with particular attention to

participatory methods, cultural valorization, and the transformative role of higher education institutions as community innovation hubs.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The conceptual foundation of this study is rooted in contemporary literature on university-community engagement, sustainable rural development, and cultural entrepreneurship. Knowledge transfer is defined as the systematic sharing and contextual application of university-generated knowledge to non-academic environments, fostering innovation, capacity-building, and long-term sustainability.

Micro, small, and medium-sized organizations have the capacity to effectively innovate within collaborative business ecosystems. These ecosystems integrate knowledge, government policy, and ICT platforms, which serve as pillars that support the entire product or service life cycle (Bucea-Manea-Țoniș et al., 2021). In rural contexts, knowledge transfer requires sensitivity to local cultures, indigenous knowledge systems, and participatory approaches that empower community agency. In rural contexts, this process is particularly nuanced, requiring sensitivity to local cultures, indigenous knowledge systems, and participatory approaches that empower community agency.

According to Palacios (2022), recent approaches underscore that effective knowledge transfer in rural areas cannot rely solely on university-driven initiatives. Multi-actor platforms integrating policy, education, and entrepreneurship must also be included. The European Innovation Partnership for Sustainable Agriculture (EIP-AGRI, 2024) demonstrates how policy instruments and participatory mechanisms foster innovation in farming and food systems, while strengthening local capacity. Conversely, programs such as the “Modelo de Transferencia de Conocimiento a Comunidades Rurales” (Model for Transferring Knowledge to Rural Communities), developed in Latin America, underscore the significance of customizing training, communication, and capacity-building efforts.

The Triple Helix model, which emphasizes collaboration among universities, industries, and government, has increasingly become a dynamic framework for aligning education, training, and regional development with the demands of the Industry 4.0 era. Within training and vocational institutions, this model strengthens graduate competencies by embedding industry participation in curriculum design, fostering innovation in teaching methods through universities, and ensuring sustainability via supportive public policies. Such collaboration enables training programs to remain responsive to technological developments while ensuring that graduates are better equipped to meet labor market demands or pursue entrepreneurial paths.

When applied in broader territorial and even rural contexts, the Triple Helix expands beyond workforce preparation into a strategic tool for regional cohesion and inclusive growth. By positioning universities as community innovation hubs and leveraging information and communication technologies (ICTs), the model fosters co-creation, reduces digital divides, and cultivates resilient ecosystems where local actors actively contribute to innovation processes. This approach confirms the value of the Triple Helix not only as a mechanism to enhance human capital, but also as a framework for sustainable development that integrates academic, industrial, and governmental resources in pursuit of long-term social and economic resilience (Suminar et al., 2025).

Rural Digital Innovation Hubs (DIHs), as illustrated by Stojanova et al. (2022), offer a sustainable model for empowering local businesses by combining digital competencies with tailored policy instruments and precision agriculture. TCC program reinforces the importance of contextualized knowledge transfer in tourism and heritage-based entrepreneurship. The collaborative work carried out links tourism and sustainable regional branding, highlighting how academic insights

can be translated into community-driven strategies that valorize local identity and foster economic resilience (Trišić et al., 2024). As Fañanás-Biescas (2023) emphasizes, the role of digital competencies and transmedia communication is determinant in shaping inclusive educational environments and promoting cultural sustainability. Her studies on TRICs (relationship, information, and communication technologies) and digital literacy in the age of artificial intelligence underscore the need for critical, participatory frameworks in academic outreach.

Furthermore, the European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability (EIP-AGRI) exemplifies the value of multi-actor collaboration in aligning academic research with rural development practices. These platforms facilitate systemic innovation and knowledge exchange, particularly in agri-food systems, enhancing territorial cohesion and fostering social innovation.

This study embraces knowledge transfer not as a linear dissemination of academic insights but as a co-creative, iterative process of mutual learning and contextual adaptation. The TCC methodology reflects principles of engaged scholarship, experiential learning, and place-based innovation, positioning local heritage as a cornerstone of entrepreneurial identity and regional branding.

## **Methodology**

The chapter adopts a hybrid methodological framework that combines case study analysis, participatory observation, and literature review to examine academic knowledge transfer in rural contexts. Central to this investigation is the TCC 2025, a multidisciplinary educational initiative held in the Maramureş region of Romania, organized by the Faculty of Sociology and Communication at Transilvania University of Braşov in partnership with the UNITA University Alliance. The program served as a living laboratory for university-community collaboration, cultural entrepreneurship, and sustainable regional development.

The program brought together twenty-five students and faculty members from eleven universities across the world, including institutions from Romania, Spain, Italy, France, Portugal, Hungary, Poland, Germany, and the United States. Participants engaged in immersive fieldwork across several villages -Târgu Lăpuș, Băiuț, Cupșeni, Groșii Țibleșului, Lăpuș, Suci de Sus, and Vima Mică- where they conducted ethnographic interviews, visual documentation, and creative workshops with local stakeholders. These activities were designed to foster mutual learning and co-create resources that reflect the region's cultural identity and entrepreneurial potential.

The data collection process involved a variety of methods, including product development, participatory workshops, and semi-structured interviews. The tangible results of this collaborative process included five thematic brochures focusing on:

1. Traditions, folklore, and traditional costumes.
2. Wooden churches and local history
3. Natural heritage
4. Local gastronomy
5. Crafts and Agriculture

Documentation of sustainable practices was achieved through the production of testimonial videos, which sought to capture the opinions and experiences of students and community members. A video was developed to provide a comprehensive overview of the project.

This methodological approach aligns with the principles of engaged scholarship and experiential learning, emphasizing reciprocal knowledge exchange and contextual adaptation. It also reflects broader trends in place-based innovation and rural digital

transformation, where universities act as catalysts for inclusive development and territorial cohesion

## **Results: Case Study from Transilvania Creative Camp**

### **A Living Laboratory of Rural Innovation**

The TCC 2025 emerged as a dynamic platform for university-led rural innovation, demonstrating the transformative potential of immersive, cross-institutional collaboration. Over the course of ten days, the camp functioned as a living laboratory, where academic inquiry met local knowledge systems, generating a multi-layered process of knowledge exchange and tangible community impact.

### **Tangible Deliverables and Thematic Exploration**

The initiative was grounded in the conceptualization and development of five thematic experiential lines, each tailored to showcase the pivotal pillars of the region to both domestic and international audiences. The selected axes functioned as organizational frameworks for student teams, guiding their fieldwork and creative output. Through participatory workshops and guided interviews, students distilled local narratives into marketable products that blended academic rigor with authentic community voices.

For instance, the resulting “Wooden Churches” brochure documented an inventory of historical sites, visually mapping their architectural lineage and integrating oral histories collected from parishioners. Each team conducted an average of six in-depth interviews per community, triangulating findings with secondary sources to ensure documentation reliability and cultural sensitivity. These brochures were subsequently submitted to the regional Tourism Board, thereby illustrating how field-based academic engagement can yield promotional materials that support local entrepreneurship and heritage preservation.

### **Multimedia Engagement and Stakeholder Testimonies**

Beyond print assets, the camp produced a testimonial video featuring forty stakeholders, including local business owners, municipal officials, and residents. This digital artifact not only amplifies the reach of the project but also serves as a compelling record of the emotional and intellectual impact of the experience. Preliminary dissemination through institutional platforms suggests promising engagement metrics, indicating the project's potential to influence sustainable tourism narratives and regional branding strategies.

### **Academic-Practitioner Synergy**

A defining feature of the camp was the robust cooperation between academic institutions and local bodies. Universities and community stakeholders co-designed field activities, research protocols, and knowledge transfer mechanisms. This synergy facilitated the rapid implementation of strategies such as digital marketing tutorials for rural entrepreneurs and hands-on workshops in sustainable agriculture, which were attended by over eighty community members. These activities reflect a commitment to capacity-building and underscore the feasibility of structured, participatory knowledge transfer in rural contexts.

### **Fieldwork as a Catalyst for Co-Creation**

The camp's structure enabled direct interaction with local communities, fostering experiential learning and co-creation. Students explored the five thematic axes through ethnographic fieldwork, transforming observations into actionable insights and creative outputs. The integration of academic perspectives with community narratives resulted in deliverables that not only supported local development but also reinforced the value of place-based innovation.

The video compilation of testimonials further captured the depth of engagement, highlighting the transformative potential of academic-community partnerships. The collaboration among universities, local authorities, and cultural institutions exemplifies the importance of multi-stakeholder engagement in designing effective rural innovation strategies.

### **Academic and Institutional Impact**

The outcomes of the TCC extend well beyond its immediate deliverables. The initiative fostered interdisciplinary dialogue, intercultural competence, and a nuanced understanding of rural dynamics. Faculty members from participating institutions such as Meisei University (Japan) and Penn State University (USA) contributed to the academic rigor of the program, offering lectures on storytelling, heritage interpretation, and visual communication. These contributions enriched the educational experience and reinforced the camp's scholarly foundation.

Moreover, the initiative aligned with the European Union's strategic objectives for rural revitalization and cultural sustainability. By embedding research activities within local contexts, the camp exemplifies best practices in academic outreach and regional development. The measurable outputs -the aforementioned brochures, video documentation, stakeholder engagement, and community workshops- demonstrate that participatory knowledge transfer is not only viable but essential for accelerating rural entrepreneurship and innovation.

### **Conclusion**

#### **A Validated Model for Rural Knowledge Transfer**

The TCC 2025 offers a validated and replicable model for university-led knowledge transfer in the domain of sustainable rural entrepreneurship. Through immersive, interdisciplinary, and collaborative engagement, the initiative demonstrated how academic best practices, grounded in multi-institutional cooperation, participatory

action, and deep respect for local contexts, can generate tangible, scalable outcomes for both students and rural communities.

This chapter illustrates that when universities align their missions with community-driven innovation, they become powerful agents of territorial development. The camp's success underscores the transformative potential of academic initiatives rooted in cultural empathy, experiential learning, and institutional synergy. By embedding knowledge exchange within real-world settings and fostering co-creation with local stakeholders, the Transilvania Creative Camp stands as a testament to the enduring value of engaged scholarship.

Its outcomes, which revolve around intercultural dialogue, reveal that structured, context-sensitive knowledge transfer is not only feasible but foundational to revitalizing rural regions. As such, this approach merits continued implementation across rural Europe and beyond, reinforcing the role of higher education institutions as catalysts for inclusive growth, cultural sustainability, and entrepreneurial resilience.

### **Reflections and Future Directions**

The incorporation of digital education practices has proven to be crucial in scaling and sustaining rural knowledge transfer. As Durán (2015) highlighted in the case of the UNAM, adopting best practices in virtual education enables universities to overcome geographic and resource limitations, thereby ensuring continuity and accessibility in training processes.

The TCC 2025 serves as a replicable model for experiential learning and sustainable entrepreneurship. Future iterations could incorporate longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of such interventions on local economies and student career trajectories. Additionally, integrating new digital platforms for broader dissemination of student outputs could enhance visibility and scalability. For future editions of TCC, blending face-to-face experiential learning with robust online platforms could enhance inclusivity and resilience, particularly in regions with limited infrastructure.

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# A Week in Romania – Memories That Will Last

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## **Introduction**

When I first signed up for the Blended Intensive Program in Romania, I expected an interesting academic experience, maybe some lectures, a few group projects, and sightseeing. What I didn't expect was how deeply this week would touch me. It wasn't just about learning; it was about living, connecting, and stepping far outside my comfort zone. Maramureş and Lăpuş Land are places where time seems to slow down, where traditions breathe through every gesture, and where hospitality is not a word but a way of life. Looking back, three moments stand out as unforgettable: the anthropological field study, the forest therapy session, and the incredible teamwork within our international group.

## **Into the Woods “Forest Therapy Session”**



Fig. 1. Group standing together in the forest

My highlight was the forest therapy session. We walked deep into the woods with a local forester who taught us to see the forest not just as trees, but as a living system. The air was fresh, the ground soft under our feet, and the silence

broken only by birdsong and the rustle of leaves. At one point, we stopped and simply listened, no phones, no talking, just nature. It was a rare moment of peace.

The forester explained that fungi make up a huge part of the forest floor, connecting trees through an underground network. I had never thought about how interconnected nature really is. That walk reminded me



Fig. 2. Forest landscape

how disconnected modern life often feels, and how important it is to slow down and reconnect.

### **Leaving the Comfort Zone “The Anthropological Field Study”**

The field study was, without doubt, one of the most challenging and rewarding parts of the program. Our task sounded simple: go into the villages, meet people, and learn about their lives.

But in reality, it meant knocking on doors, introducing ourselves to strangers, and hoping they would welcome us. Our first visit was to an elderly woman and her grandson.



Fig.1. Grandma drawing water from the well

Their home was modest but

full of warmth. She showed us how they live, how they care for their animals, and how they draw water from the well. I will never forget the moment she pulled up

the bucket of fresh water and offered it to us with a smile. It was such a simple gesture, yet it spoke volumes about generosity and trust.



Fig. 4. Beekeeping truck

Later that day, we visited an older couple who were beekeepers. Their pride in their work was contagious. They explained how they produce honey and even let us taste some fresh honey.

Standing there, surrounded by the smell of beeswax and wildflowers, I realized how much knowledge and tradition is preserved in these villages.

These encounters were more than interviews, they were human connections. Despite the language barrier, we laughed, shared stories, and learned from each other. I left those homes feeling humbled and grateful. Hospitality doesn't require wealth; it requires heart.



Fig.2. Honey tasting moment

## The Power of Diversity “Our International Team”

Finally, I have to mention the group itself. We were a mix of cultures, languages, and ages, students from Spain, Poland, Hungary, Italy, Greece, Germany, Romania, and many more. At first, it felt like a challenge: different habits, different ways of thinking. But within days, those differences became strengths. We learned from each other, laughed together, and supported one another through every task.

Working in such a diverse team showed me something important: even when we speak different languages, we share the same emotions, hopes, and dreams. Europe is not just a political idea, it’s a lived reality when people come together like this. I felt proud to be part of something that showed unity in diversity.



# **Impressions from Maramureş – A Journey into Romania’s Heart**

**Moritz MÖTZUNG**

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Taking part in the Blended Intensive Program in Romania has been one of the most memorable experiences of my studies so far. For one week, I had the chance to travel through the region of Maramureş together with about thirty other international students.

What we expected to be a short academic project soon turned into something much deeper a journey full of cultural discoveries, new friendships, and moments that will stay with me for a long time. From the very beginning, it was clear that this program was designed not just to teach us something about culture, but to make us experience it directly. Maramureş, located in the north of Romania, is known for its wooden churches, traditional crafts, mountain villages, and strong sense of community. Traveling through this region felt like stepping into a part of Europe that still holds on to old rhythms and traditions, where time moves slower and people live more connected to nature and each other.

## **The Mining Village – Between Curiosity and Connection**

One of the most striking moments for me was our visit to a small mining village high up in the mountains. The area had a raw beauty quiet, green, and surrounded by forested hills. The village itself seemed remote, almost hidden from the modern world. Life there was simple, and one could still feel the influence of the mining tradition that had shaped the community for generations. When we arrived, I could

sense a certain hesitation among the locals. It's understandable a group of thirty international students suddenly showing up in a small, isolated place can easily draw attention. We didn't speak the language, we looked different, and we came with cameras and notebooks. But what really impressed me was how quickly this initial distance turned into warmth and curiosity.

After only a few conversations and shared smiles, the atmosphere changed completely. The people became incredibly welcoming. They seemed genuinely pleased that someone had come to listen, to ask questions, and to show interest in their lives. What moved me most was that they didn't put on a show or try to impress us; they were simply themselves honest, humble, and kind. Many of them said they were happy that we were there because "people don't usually come here." They appreciated that we were taking the time to see them, to recognize their village and its culture. That simple human connection was one of the most beautiful aspects of the trip.

### **The Power of the Group**

Another part of this program that deeply affected me was the dynamic within our international group. We came from all over Europe different languages, study backgrounds, and personalities yet within a few days, it felt as if we had known each other for a long time. Sharing buses, meals, discussions, and adventures created a special kind of bond. It was fascinating to see how our cultural differences became a source of learning rather than division. Conversations at dinner or during long rides turned into little lessons about the world about how people think, live, and dream in different countries. Sometimes it was challenging to find common ground, but precisely those moments made the experience richer. I think everyone, including myself, learned to be a little more patient, open, and flexible.

Leaving my comfort zone was part of the process. Whether it was speaking up in discussions, joining spontaneous local dances, or approaching people in rural villages, I learned to overcome hesitation and just engage. Those small moments laughing with strangers, getting lost with new friends, or trying to pronounce Romanian words correctly made the week unforgettable.

### **Silence and Landscape**

One memory that stands out vividly is our hike through the forested hills of Maramureş. The path led us through dense woods, past streams and meadows filled with wildflowers. After a steep climb, we reached a viewpoint overlooking an endless sea of green hills. The air was incredibly fresh, and the silence almost complete just the sound of the wind and the distant ringing of cowbells. In that moment, I felt a deep sense of calm and presence. It was a reminder of how powerful nature can be when we allow ourselves to slow down and simply take it in. I realized how disconnected daily life often is from such simple, grounding experiences. Romania's landscape, untouched and genuine, reminded me that beauty doesn't need to be spectacular it just needs to be real.

### **The Field Study – Learning Through Encounters**

A particularly memorable part of the program was the anthropological field study we conducted. Each group was paired with a local Romanian high school student who helped us communicate with villagers. The task sounded simple but turned out to be one of the most meaningful exercises I have ever done: go out into the village, knock on doors, and talk to people. At first, it felt awkward. We didn't know what to expect would people be willing to talk? Would they understand what we were doing? But as soon as we started, all uncertainty disappeared. The villagers were incredibly open. They invited us into their homes, offered us drinks, and told us stories about their lives, their work, and their families. One moment that I'll never

forget was when we were offered homemade honey. The host proudly explained how it was made, and we tasted it together. It was such a small thing, but it carried so much meaning an act of kindness and sharing that said more than any formal interview ever could. Through gestures, smiles, and shared curiosity, we managed to connect despite the language barrier. That experience showed me how valuable it is to approach people with openness and humility. Real learning happens not only in classrooms or lectures but in these direct, human encounters in listening, observing, and understanding life from someone else's perspective.

### **Lasting Impressions**

Looking back, that week in Romania changed the way I see cultural exchange. It's not about collecting information or checking off tourist sights. It's about empathy about entering someone else's world and realizing that, no matter where we come from, we share the same basic emotions and needs. The people of Maramureş taught me that hospitality doesn't require wealth, and that pride in one's culture can coexist with generosity and openness. The friendships formed during this journey, both with the locals and with other participants, feel meaningful and lasting.

When I think about Romania now, I don't just remember the breathtaking hills or the old wooden churches. I remember faces, laughter, shared meals, and the sense of being genuinely welcomed. I remember how it felt to be part of something that was at once educational and profoundly human. This trip reminded me why international programs like this matter. They don't just connect with universities; they connect people, experiences, and stories. They make the world a little smaller and a lot more human. What remains from Maramureş are the sounds of the forest, the taste of homemade honey, the laughter of friends, and the warmth of strangers who opened their doors and their hearts to us.

**Do not forget the assignment: A movie which brings tourists to**

## **Lăpuș Land**

**Nicolai SCHÄDEL**

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“There will be a BIP in Transilvania. Join with your two best students and try to make a good impression! The university there perfectly fits to us.”

Something like that is what the head of HdM's International Office said to me when I happened to walk into her office on a day in spring 2025. “HdM” is short for the German University of Applied Sciences „Hochschule der Medien Stuttgart”, in other parts of the world often called “Stuttgart Media University” On this spring day in the south of Germany no more talking was needed. Also it was no big effort to convince two of HdM's top students to become enthusiastic about the Transilvania-BIP. So the three of us joined.



Left to right: Moritz Mötzung, Nicolai Schädel, Pascal Holl

The task: A destination marketing video attracting tourists to Lăpuș Land, Romania.

The challenge essentially was to find a way how a place without beaches, without a big city nightlife, without wellness hotels, without shopping miles and without golf courses can compete against Marbella, Antalya or Paris. But what is there to show in a movie if the quality of the air is one of the most valuable assets of the region?

Lăpuș Land is an area in the North of Romania where the Ukrainian border is nearer than the closest hip city with an airport Cluj Napoca. A small river, low population and not much industry ban all hectic. Between small villages, some with Hungarian roots, visitors can find several wooden churches and lovely people who look after their gardens while enjoying the first shot of Palinka of the day. The biggest regional city is Târgu Lăpuș where a highschool was used as the BIP's base camp. Even *Tripadvisor* does not come up with to many answers when asked what a tourist could do there. But maybe that could be considered a chance.



*A local boy shows us his skill on the Caval, a traditional wooden instrument*

There is an easy way to bring more tourists to a destination. Make it mainstream: Convert the area into whatever most tourists want and then use classical marketing channels to position the place as the new Las Vegas or copy of whatever other

famous place served as role model. This was, however, no option for the students who participated in the Transilvania-BIP since it was not their job to prepare or make investment decisions. There was no budget for any short term investments into tourist attractions available anyway. Hence the students' job was a no-budget production which helps Lăpuș Land as it is to be viewed as an attractive tourist destination.

A solution to this task could be to first identify the USPs<sup>3</sup> of Lăpuș Land and then to highlight them in a movie which is addressed to a well selected audience who might be triggered by exactly those insights. So what are the relevant USPs?

- Low density of population and little industry allow proximity to nature.
- The absence of night- and beachlife make silence perceptible.
- And old wooden churches, some monasteries and a hungarian community preserving its traditions in the middle of northern Romania make history experiencable.

This screams for a “3-H-Strategy” targeting

- hikers,
- hunters
- and historians.

If that strategy is pursued the question arises how a movie should be designed in order to attract those “3-H-Targets”. People who seek silence are unlikely to be triggered by aggressive marketing. So originality using tools like irony or the depth of silence might be the right choice. An example using irony can be found in a clip intended to market the Belgian city of Ghent:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1b051xtHuc8>

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<sup>3</sup> “USP” is short for “Unique Selling Proposition”.

And an instruction of how to use the power of silence can be viewed here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uzval91hwow>

Even with those tools in mind the implementation of effective destination marketing for the benefit of Lăpuş Land in a movie remains a challenge. While hoping that this challenge will finally be successfully tackled I truly thank my colleague Florin Nechita from Transilvania University of Braşov for a great BIP-organisation. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to meet Florin and many other colleagues from Romania, Poland, Hungary and Spain in the course of the BIP and I hope to have many more opportunities to meet and work with them in the future. Thank you Florin!



# Transilvania Creative Camp as a Service Learning Project: Strengths and Hidden Potentials

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## Introduction

My involvement with *Transilvania Creative Camp* (TCC) started in 2023 when the University of Dunaújváros (DUE) was invited into this ERASMUS+ Blended Intensive Programme (BIP), and some students from the Communication and Media undergraduate programme took part in it. Then only coordinating their participation, in early 2025, I co-created a presentation about TCC for an international tourism marketing conference with project leader Florin Nechita from Transilvania University of Brasov (UNITBV), and Takanori Kawamata from TCC co-founder Meisei University Tokyo. There we interpreted TCC 2023 in the triple conceptual frameworks of *extended and enlarged communities of practice*, *service learning*, and as an example of *working life connected learning* (Nechita, Sitku, & Kawamata, 2025). With this background, I participated in the 2025 edition of TCC (July-September 2025) as a teacher, a coordinator of the Hungarian student team, and a researcher of *university community engagement* (cf. Benneworth, Culum, Farnell, Kaiser, Seeber, Šćukanec, Vossensteyn, & Westerheijden, 2018). Having collected ample field experience there, and using my analysis from the said conference presentation, here I would like to share my insights about the potentials of TCC (2016-2025) as a service learning (SL) programme.

Designed as a reflective essay drawing on data from both theoretical analysis and empirical sources, my paper relies on a model for service learning in higher education (Table 1) that I developed from the European literature to date and a previous investigation of mine (Sitku, 2021). This was used for the deductive thematic analysis of 2016-2025 TCC project documents<sup>4</sup> and a publication on TCC 2023 (Nechita & Tanaka, 2017). Accompanying these sources, I analysed my fieldnotes from the empirical part of TCC BIP 2025, i.e. the participatory observations of places, events, activities and informal conversations with locals in and around Târgu Lăpuș, with the same qualitative data analysis method.

The aim of my examination was to find out how service learning, a current higher education pedagogical methodology, could be used in TCC: how much it already corresponded with it, and which areas needed development for fully fledged application. I also offer my reflections on how this could be achieved in the future to exploit the benefits of this didactic tool, such as expanding local community–university co-creation, deepening the student learning experience, and showcasing the organising university’s social responsibility practice on the national level.

The paper is organised into five parts. After a short introduction, the concept and model of service learning is presented. Then a detailed reflection on TCC as a potential SL programme is given along the logic of already existing SL features (*Strengths*) and aspects to improve or add (*Partial Alignment*). The fourth subchapter offers recommendations on what and how to change in the present form of TCC in order to develop it into a full-fledged SL programme—should UNITBv wish to do so. Finally, I conclude with my reflection on the potential benefits of TCC as a SL project for its participating students.

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<sup>4</sup> See the TCC 2025 project description and schedule in this book.

## Service Learning

What is service learning? It is a current, experiential learning methodology in higher education which integrates meaningful community service into relevant higher education course curricula. Learning derives from students' work on a real world problem, which arises from the local community (e.g. a social problem in a city district), and their active engagement with and within that community. Teachers and community representatives design, deliver and evaluate the SL segment of the course together. Another key element is the use of various experiential learning and reflection strategies, which are fundamental to the learning process (McIlrath et al., 2016; Sáez Gambin, 2024), just as Furco's (1996) warning to balance student learning outcomes and external partners' benefits.

SL is also part of a university's community engagement in the *Teaching & Learning* dimension (Benneworth et al., 2018), and is a popular manifestation of this mission among European universities (McIlrath et al., 2016). By way of students' and faculty's commitment, and authentic activity on the addressing of some specific societal challenge in mutually beneficial collaboration with external organisations, the university directly contributes to local/regional/national societal sustainability, and expands its stakeholder relations—two fundamental strategic aims in current European higher education policy. Moreover, this pedagogy generates community learning (McIlrath et al., 2016), which may develop into a synergic process and give rise to local social innovation (Kozma, 2019). Table 1 below summarizes SL best practices from recent European higher education research, identifying its dimensions and qualifying categories.

Table 1: Aggregate SL model in European higher education

<b>DIMENSION</b>	<b>CATEGORY (with indicators)</b>
<b>Link to Curricula</b>	<b>Embedded in university curricula (yes/no)</b>
	<b>Linked to a course</b> (name of study programme and course)
	<b>Provided with Learning Outcomes</b> (specific LOs: yes/no)
	<b>Rewarded with credits</b> (number of credits)
<b>Partnership</b>	<b>Realized in collaborative, mutually beneficial partnerships with relevant local community stakeholders</b> (number of partners, areas and aims of collaboration)
	<b>Customized offerings (n.d.)</b>
<b>Community Needs</b>	<b>The collaboration addresses a real community need, challenge or problem</b> (name of need/problem, target, expected result)
<b>Relevant and Meaningful Service</b>	<b>Active participation by students in meaningful &amp; personally relevant activities with attainable &amp; visible outcomes</b> (personal relevance & motivation, challenging tasks, attainable outcomes, visible results)
	<b>Commitment (n.a.)</b>
	<b>Co-creation of value (n.a.)</b>
<b>Collaboration</b>	<b>Community partners and students are part of the entire SL process: planning, decision-making, realization, assessment and evaluation</b>

DIMENSION	CATEGORY (with indicators)
	<p>(roles, tasks, responsibilities of partners, student involvement areas, regular communication)</p> <p><b>Has immediate &amp; positive community impact</b> (utilisation of results)</p> <p><b>Transformation</b> (n.d.)</p>
Reflection	<p><b>Continuous application of multiple &amp; challenging reflection methods &amp; activities throughout the SL process to prompt deep thinking, self-analysis &amp; reflection of students' relationship to society</b> (various reflection methods; before, during, after the activity; students' supervision)</p> <p><b>Reflection for developing ethical &amp; global citizenship</b> (n.d.)</p> <p><b>Reflection together with the community</b> (yes/no)</p>
Monitoring progress	<p><b>Ongoing assessment of the quality of implementation and progress towards meeting the specific goals.</b> <b>Outcomes are used for the improvement and sustainability of the SL process.</b> (yes/no, form, frequency, multiple sources, utilisation for improvement, communication of evidence of progress)</p> <p><b>Continuous improvement</b> (n.d.)</p>
Duration and Intensity	<p><b>Sufficient duration and intensity to address community needs and achieve its learning outcomes.</b> (Concentrated blocks of time, phases: Needs Assessment, Design &amp; Preparation, Action, Reflexion, Assessment, Communication)</p>

DIMENSION	CATEGORY (with indicators)
	<p><b>Most effective: 20-40 hours</b> (sufficient time)</p>

Source: Own edition based on NYLC, 2011; McIlrath et al., 2016; Gregorová et al., 2020; Moledo et al., 2021; Hollenbeck, 2024; Sáez et al., 2024.

## Reflection on TCC as a SL project

### Strengths

Transilvania Creative Camp already shows alignment with the SL model (Table 1) in several dimensions: *Partnership, Community Needs, Relevant and Meaningful Service, and Collaboration* are its strongest features. *Partnership* refers to TCC to be realised in collaborative, mutually beneficial partnerships with local community stakeholders for whom it provides customised outputs (NYLC, 2011; McIlrath et al., 2016; Hollenbeck, 2024). Indeed, TCC operates with 30+ collaborating partners from 5-8 universities, 5-10 marketing, advertising and communication experts/businesses, and 20+ local community partners. Moreover, the first group represents not only the national but also the international level. For example, in 2025 Romanian, Hungarian, Polish, German, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and Japanese students and/or faculty worked together with representatives of the communities of Târgu Lăpuş, Rogoz, Cupşeni, Ungureni, Băiuţ, Strâmbu Băiuţ, Lăpuş, Groşii Țibleşului, Suciul de Sus, Dămăcuşeni, Drăghia, Vima Mare, Vima Mică, Peteritea, Răzoare, Rohia and Rohiița. This highly diverse group of people brought their special perspectives to the programme tasks: those of their national cultures, personal approaches and professional background (Tourism, Marketing, Digital Communication, Photography, Video and Film Production, Anthropology, Intercultural Communication, Higher Education Pedagogy, Cultural Heritage Organisation, Forestry, Folk-dancing, etc.), which set a highly creative atmosphere to common work.

Furthermore, the aim of the TCC collaboration is to promote Târa Lăpuşului as a rural tourism destination on the international market, while sustaining the local cultural and natural heritage, and traditional way of life. Therefore, the TCC fieldwork phase is to create various tourism marketing promotion materials based on the intercultural interpretation of the region's historical, cultural and natural heritage. This transfers participants' professional knowledge, technical skills and international best practices in advertising and digital communication to the tourism marketing challenges of Târa Lapuşului. The resulting touristic promotion package offers photos, videos, short films, brochures and social media posts around five customised topics: *Traditions, Folklore and Folk Costumes; Wooden Churches and Local History; Gastronomy; Crafts and Agriculture; and Natural Heritage*. These customised outputs align with the local community's tourism marketing needs, and may also provide TCC students with rich learning outcomes.

*Community Needs* in the SL model mean that the academic-professional-local stakeholder collaboration addresses a real community need, challenge or problem, has a specific target with an expected result, and is tailor-made for the local community (NYLC, 2011; McIlrath et al., 2016; Hollenbeck, 2024). As mentioned earlier, the participating municipalities wish to increase the region's tourist turnover substantially while preserving the local cultural and natural heritage, i.e. balancing tourism expansion and local sustainability. Having renewed their tourism strategies and action plans, they intend to target the international tourism market with the advertising products of TCC: originally the Japanese, by today the Asian, European and South American markets, and such segments as relevant tourism trends (e.g. immersive cultural stay, agritourism, eco-tourism, community-based tourism) may attract to Târgu Lăpuş and its surrounding villages. Therefore, TCC 2025 students were to create specific personas of travellers (age, origin, customer type and touristic interests) whom they addressed with their digital promotional products.

For example, the twentysomething male world traveller who loved exploring hidden spots of Nature, the Romanian family who wanted their children to experience a disappearing way of life, or the German pensioner group who enjoyed unique folk traditions and gastronomy. Accordingly, a host of dedicated digital marketing material was created by students' committed work: two short films, a brochure for each theme, and much short content for TikTok, Instagram and Facebook.

Another strong dimension is *Relevant and Meaningful Service*. This refers to students' active participation in professionally meaningful and personally relevant activities, which set attainable aims and target visible outcomes. In detail, this constitutes of *personal relevance and motivation, challenging tasks, attainable outcomes, and visible results* (NYLC, 2011; McIlrath et al., 2016; Hollenbeck, 2024). How does TCC perform in this SL dimension? Based on my participatory observations of TCC 2025 and pedagogical understanding, this is the strongest point of the programme for several reasons. First, participating students can come from a variety of relevant academic fields (Communication, Digital Media, Marketing, Tourism, Anthropology, Sociology, Art, History), and should have basic photography/filming, photo/video editing, and/or web design skills. Working as members of intercultural and interdisciplinary teams on a given theme, they actively collaborate on the daily visual documentation and content creation tasks. This expands their professional knowledge and develop their practical, digital content creating skills. Moreover, by way of active participation in teamwork, students may gain such pedagogical and psychological benefits as involvement and acceptance (by team membership), endurance and responsibility (by committed teamwork), empathy, a sense of worth and of community (by the co-creation of value in a team), as well as a sense of achievement (by attainable and visible outcomes). Another SL subdimension, *commitment* also includes the programme's dedication to the local communities: TCC has been

organised for ten years now (TCC Lăpuș 2016, TCC 2023, TCC 2025). Lastly, *co-creation of value* works on more than one level: on the university–professional businesses–local community level (TCC BIP framework), among the international faculty (TCC BIP theoretical training part), as well as among and inside the international teams of students and teachers (TCC BIP fieldwork part).

The fourth dimension where TCC shows strength is *Collaboration*, which the SL model understands as community partners, university faculty and students being integral parts of the entire SL process: they design, plan, make decisions about and realise activities together, which they also assess and evaluate together. This is to have a positive immediate community impact, and even carry transformation potential (NYLC, 2011; McIlrath et al., 2016; Gregorová et al., 2020). How are these realised by TCC?

As for the roles, tasks and responsibilities of the external partners, the participating municipalities and communities co-design the fieldwork part of the programme with the coordinating university (UNITBv): its aims, expected outputs, schedule, activities and closing event. They provide the TCC team with accommodation, catering and transportation for the week, offer community experts for the fieldwork activities, and evaluate student work in the fieldwork-closing presentation event. Students participate in online presentations (TCC BIP theoretical part) and work actively during the fieldwork. This involves visual, audio and textual data collection (ethnography), data analysis, photo and video editing, the co-creation of the expected project outputs, a group presentation of their work, and participation in the cultural programmes organised by the host communities. During all this, they live and work together in international teams, which develops their intercultural communication skills (e.g. openness, empathy, English language proficiency) and creativity via the conceptualisation and sense-making of their experiences, idea-generation and implementation, critical reflection and iteration

(Kawamata, 2025). The heart of this complex collaboration is another SL subdimension, *regular communication*, which is very intensive and very much intercultural in TCC: during the online webinars, the on-site presentations, the fieldwork activities, students' teamwork, the extracurricular programmes, the common stay, and the online post-production period.

### **Partial alignment**

However, TCC BIP shows some weaknesses in the *Collaboration* dimension: although the project outputs have positive immediate impact for the participating settlements by way of their tourism marketing utilisation on social media platforms and at various travel fairs, it is unclear what impact they make on the touristic turnover of the region. TCC has been organised since 2016, but no examination has been made on the extent it contributed to the expansion of local tourism, or what effects it made on the participating communities (e.g. *Community Learning*). Thus it is also unknown if it has transformational potential for them.

Another SL dimension with mixed results is *Link to Curricula* (NYLC, 2011; McIlrath et al., 2016). Although TCC awards students with 3 ECTS credits for their participation, it is only loosely linked to university curricula. It is an ERASMUS+ BIP organised as a summer school, i.e. as an extracurricular programme, is open to several study programmes, and on several levels (undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral studies). Thus, it is not embedded into specific courses on those study programmes, nor does it have clear learning outcomes, either in general for the invited study programmes, or in particular for selected courses.

The *Duration and Intensity* of a service learning programme means that it has sufficient time and level of intensity to address community needs and achieve the targeted learning outcomes. Its ideal length is 20-40 hours (Sáez et al., 2024), organised in concentrated blocks of time (NYLC, 2011; McIlrath et al. 2016). TCC overachieves in this: its total length is 2 months with a 1-week fieldwork period,

which amounts to a minimum of 52 lessons in hybrid format. This is made up of 12 lessons of pre- and post-fieldwork online learning, 30 lessons of fieldwork, and about 10 hours of student work, which makes it a highly intensive programme! However, SL requires a series of phases: *Needs Assessment, Design & Preparation, Action, Reflection, Assessment, and Communication/Dissemination*. The first three are evidently met by TCC: local community leaders (mayors, tourist office director, national park director, community event organizer, NGO director, etc.) and the coordinating university (UNITbv) plan, design and realise the fieldwork part of TCC together, although it seems that student needs (expected learning outcomes) are not pre-assessed. *Reflection* and *Assessment* are present, but in somewhat underdeveloped form, as the analysis of the last two dimensions will show. As for *Communication/Dissemination* of TCC teaching–learning and community outcomes, there is academic dissemination (book, conference presentations, articles) and informal feedback between the organizing parties, but their effectiveness in promoting the programme to a wider academic audience would need further investigation.

An essential dimension of the service learning methodology is *Reflection*. This aspect requires the continuous application of multiple and challenging reflection methods and activities by students, and throughout the whole SL process. Its aim is to induce deep thinking, self-analysis and reflection on students' relationship to Society (NYLC, 2011; McIlrath et al., 2016), and to support the development of ethical and global citizenship (SLIHE, 2020). A crucial condition for effective student reflection is that it must be done together with the community partners (Moledo et al., 2021). TCC motivates student reflection before, during and after the programme via pre-fieldwork webinars discussing student expectations; the fieldwork closing team presentations, which include members' impressions; and the post-fieldwork period, which asks for student feedback in the form of illustrated reflections. However,

student reflection is not guided, do not utilize a variety of techniques, its frequency is not sufficient for a full SL programme (requires daily reflection exercises), and the student supervision element is missing (NYLC, 2011; Moledo et al., 2021). Also absent is the collaborative feature of the reflection: the local community must be part of this special learning process. In TCC it is only the official representatives of Târgu Lăpuş (mayor, tourist office director) who take part in the assessment-reflection of students' end-of-fieldwork group presentation; other representatives, settlements, occasions for reflection, or further reflection methods are not present in the programme. As for developing students' ethical and global citizenship, TCC motivates students' individual reflections indirectly when calling attention to the preservation of natural heritage (e.g. forest tree nursery in the Secular Forests natural area in Strâmbu Băiuţ), the economically sustaining role of traditional agricultural work for many local people (e.g. in Groşii Țibleşului), collaborative ethnic relations (e.g. between Romanians and Hungarians of Rogoz and Dămăcuşeni), and religious tolerance (e.g. the multi-religious city centre of Târgu Lăpuş), but this is not exploited pedagogically for specific learning outcomes. Nevertheless, direct intercultural learning does take place: acquiring how to cooperate and co-create in a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural TCC team on highly complex tasks in a foreign environment is of high developmental value for global citizenship.

A final dimension for a best practice European service learning model is *Monitoring Progress*. This needs the ongoing assessment of the quality of programme implementation, and of the progression towards the specific goals the programme set. The outcomes of the assessment process should be used for the continuous improvement (Hollenbeck, 2024) and sustainable organisation of the SL programme (NYLC, 2011; McIlrath et al., 2016). Transilvania Creative Camp uses ongoing supervision and multiple rounds of assessment: UNITBv academics lead and

monitor students' daily work in the fieldwork period, student presentations are evaluated by them and the leadership of Târgu Lăpuș, and the final products (short films, brochures) undergo several rounds of review before acceptance. Yet, the international academics are not involved systematically in the supervision and evaluation processes, nor are other members of the participating local communities. Besides TCC team level email correspondance, webinars, a WhatsApp channel, and Google Drive file storage, there is a daily evening workshop in the schedule of the fieldwork period, which provides ample platforms and occasions for continuous communication and student collaboration. However, student supervision on the thematic group level could improve the depth of their daily work and the quality of the final outputs. Furthermore, an unexploited possibility is the involvement of local community representatives into students' daily task execution, which would ensure their informing, monitoring and improving of the quality of ongoing fieldwork.

### **Recommendations**

Should UNITBv decide to expand Transilvania Creative Camp BIP into a full-fledged service learning programme, I offer the organisers the following recommendations based on the presented partial alignments. As for the curricular dimension, they should strengthen the link between TCC student activities (either online or offline), and academic study programmes and courses. Which specific courses, on which specific study programmes, and on what level should recognize TCC student work? To achieve this, and improve a SL subdimension, TCC student activities should receive clear learning outcomes, such as *Knowledge, Skills, Attitude, Autonomy and Responsibility*. This requires close collaboration with the teachers of those specific academic courses at UNITBv, which is a meticulous process, but would greatly increase the academic embeddedness of TCC. On the other hand, clear LOs would facilitate the recognition of students' TCC performance at the partner universities,

either by linking it to specific courses, recognizing it as part of a course assignment, or rewarding it with extra credits.

As for timing, presently TCC is an extracurricular summer programme and requires one, extended block of time (TCC BIP fieldwork part). This is contrary to the original idea of SL being part of the weekly/monthly coursework of a course in the study period of an academic semester. However, as TCC needs only a week of intensive fieldwork, this may be organized in the mid-semester holidays (if long enough), thus building it into the schedule of the targeted courses. To increase its academic intensity, I recommend a survey of interested students' expected LOs from TCC before its launching, which may also inform the design process of academic LOs.

*Reflection* is underdeveloped, therefore I advise the embedding of relevant student reflection techniques into the next TCC student activities, which again can only be done in collaboration with colleagues teaching on the specific courses TCC connects to via its LOs. Yet, this may boost student performance and the pedagogic value of TCC. Including student supervision in the final day of the fieldwork, inviting representatives of the local communities into the reflection process, and using reflection on a daily basis during the fieldwork are further options to increase the added value of TCC for both students and communities.

Professionals from the participating Târa Lăpuşului settlements could be invited to take part in the daily and post-fieldwork assessment of student work, too. This would provide opportunity for monitoring the development of the marketing materials and give them some influence in their forming, thus increasing students' awareness of customer needs and customers' satisfaction with the end-products.

Finally, it is yet unclear what impact TCC students' tourism marketing promotional products have made on the touristic turnover of the microregion. Therefore, it is worth investigating to what extent TCC has contributed to the expansion of local tourism; what kind of impact it has made on the participating communities; and if it

has empowered them with transformational potential, e.g. to become a learning community? Such academic research and its strategic dissemination may further increase the recognition of both the TCC and the Târgu Lăpuș–Țara Lăpușului brand.

## Conclusions

By the repeated organisation of TCC BIP, UNITBV may showcase its social responsibility practice on the national level, TCC organisers may improve project quality by expanding local community–university co-creation, but to me, who adopted the higher education pedagogical perspective, it is the deepening of the student learning experience that is worth developing. I hope that my short introduction to service learning and practical recommendations will motivate TCC project owner, coordinator and organiser UnitBV to consider them in the future when thinking about the ways of expanding this exciting blended intensive programme.

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## Lăpuș Land through the Lens: Collecting the World

**Iosif TRIF**

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The Transilvania Creative Camp, held in August 2025 in Țara Lăpușului (Lăpuș Land), was not only an extraordinary photography exercise for students and teachers from all over the world, but also a profound invitation to reflection. As Susan Sontag observed in her most famous book, *On Photography*, photography captures “miniatures of reality”, meaning condensed fragments of the world that belong to us for a moment and which, by the simple act of being captured, become forms of knowledge and interpretation. In this sense, the camp experience offered us not only images, but also the opportunity to think about how we look at, choose and keep the world in our frames, a reflection that is worth continuing with some thoughts anchored in this practice.

### **Entering the Territory: Seeing and Learning to See**

It is often said that photography captures reality. In Lăpuș Land, we have discovered that photography, in fact, involves another type of a so-called *looking chronology*: First, one must *look*, then one must learn to *see photographically* and only thirdly, one must raise the camera and shoot. Learning to see needs time - understanding your position in relation to the subject, seeing an event with your mind before it happens, anticipating the “decisive moment”, as Henri Cartier-Bresson would say in his 1952 essay, and shooting in a way that conveys the most meaning through a distilled visual composition. To shoot a decisive moment, in which the photographer



captures “the significance of an event as well as of a precise organization of forms which gave that event its proper expression”, meaning the moment in which the visual elements that describe the composition of the picture express the essence of the very things that are being portrayed makes the difference between a simple picture and one filled with meaning.

Whether a wet blade of grass, an icon in a church or a color story, learning to see through the lens requires patience and dedication. A photographic

journey in a place such as Lăpuș Land, is a great teaching moment, as it has the ability to serve as a teaching moment about capturing timeless images that will hopefully stand the test of time.

While anything and everything can be a photographic subject, having access to the more interesting and visually appealing things in life is a great contributor to taking beautiful snapshots. Photographer Brooks Jensen said in his book of essays (*On Photography, with Love*) that access to visually interesting things is a great booster and enabler for attractive photos.

Having access to things one would not normally see in their ordinary life, such as traditional weddings, buffalo homecomings or 18-century wooden churches’ balconies is definitely important and represents the outside, physical access to things, which is very much needed. However, at the same time, one, in his process of learning to become a photographer, needs to give himself access to understanding the rhythm of a place and of a time, and listening and watching what goes on, as the first step in a photographic journey. Therefore, it can definitely be argued that photography is an instrument, but it quickly becomes a type of

language. Images have always been a form of communication, of understanding the world, of taking ownership of some parts of it, and ultimately, of being part of the stream of life. Since cave paintings and all the way to the churches of the 20th century, images have been a way to express the world and to be a part of a narrative. In photography, one does not take pictures just to *take* something, but to *enter* into a relationship, both with the subject (even if the subject is not a person), and with the viewer who will later see your picture. This relationship, it can be said, changes the way the real manifests itself in front of you. In her famous book “On Photography”, Susan Sontag writes that “instead of just recording reality, photographs have become the norm for the way things appear to us, thereby changing the very idea of reality, and of realism.” When you live a few days in a place so different from your everyday life, you realize that images do not just document; but that they model memory and, sometimes, they unify it. In this context, one can also note that photography, it can be argued, is an art form of the memory.

### **Photography as a Bridge between History and Memory**

Lăpuș Land is strongly tied to the past, but not really as a burden, but as a core, around which everything revolves. The churches, may they be wooden or not, speak at the same time to the stillness and the light: they saw rituals, they have taken in the energies of burnt candles, and in the altars, those gone from this world have been mentioned. Therefore, I can say that what we have photographed, is, in this context, beyond a mere architectural product, it is a story, a narrative of people who, through their lives and gestures create a type of domestic, local liturgy. The folk costumes we photographed were not just costumes, clothes, but garments for High Holidays and important celebrations. The dances we photographed are not just shows, but a living form of the local community; acting as a pumping heart. We have photographed not houses, but homes, colors and not paint, and landscapes that look today just as they did hundreds of years ago, thus acting like a bridge to the

past (and, why not, the future?), having the same grandeur today as they had back in the day.



Given that many aspects have not changed through time, photography becomes a way to travel to the past and is at the same time a journey in the future, as the world as we see it today is the past of tomorrow. And, it can also be said that still images hold a

different weight than moving pictures, if we remind ourselves that Susan Sontag observed that photographs linger in memory more effectively than moving images because they represent a “neat slice of time, not a flow.” Unlike film’s continuous movement, a photograph isolates one concrete, self-contained moment, something we can hold, return to, and fix in our minds (and hands), making it more enduring and easier to recall.

A slice of eternity can be kept in one’s heart like an icon, the flux goes away, but the fixed images remain.

### **Appropriating the World**

When taking all these things into account, we begin to see how photographic theory can become a lived experience.

And once again, it is worth returning to Susan Sontag’s brilliant book, where she wrote that “to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed.”

What Sontag meant is that taking a photograph is not a neutral act, but a way of claiming possession over what we see around us, a means of turning the always-fleeting reality into something we can keep, interpret, and display.



Each photograph therefore becomes both an assertion of knowledge and an exercise of power: we frame the world, choose (curate) what deserves to be remembered, and by doing so, subtly reshape it. However, this preservation process can also lessen its meaning by turning a complicated moment into a picture, contributing to what she refers to as a “duplicate world of images” that runs the risk of displacing real experience.

We could see this clearly during our journey through Lăpuș Land, where photography became a way of appropriating what surrounded us: from landscapes and faces to buildings and animals, making them our own through the lenses of our cameras. What Sontag observed in the 1970s has only grown more relevant in the age of digital media: today, we often take photographs as a way of validating reality, as if something exists more fully (or at all) once it has been captured and shared.

As Sontag also noted, “to collect photographs is to collect the world.” In our age of instant sharing and apparently limitless storage, that impulse has expanded dramatically.



Today, we are no longer just collecting the world, but continuously re-creating and recomposing it through images, until the act of seeing and the act of photographing seem to become almost indistinguishable. For the participants of the

Creative Camp, this idea became palpable: in photographing Lăpuș Land, we realized that we were not only documenting a place, but translating our presence into its fabric, with each photograph, in a way becoming a dialogue between what is seen and what sees back.

If we were to extend these thoughts to our experience in Maramureș county, we could say that, just as we immersed ourselves in the lives of the locals, becoming a type of tourists in other people's lives, so did our photographs become more than a form of explaining the world, but a way to *stay* in it, going in a way beyond history. Lăpuș Land is neither an open-air museum, nor a lost world. It is a reality that still breathes and expands, a present that carries with it the remains of a past and the seeds of a future. And we can see that in the pictures, as the images are a “now” and not a “then”.

### **Between Nature and Culture: The Human as a Symbolic Interface**

If one takes pictures of objects or other elements with thought in mind, then those things become symbols and have more meaning than they would if they were simple captures. Symbols are the way in which life lays itself out and Lăpuș Land is the way in which symbols are found everywhere, a cross, a hill, a pattern on a piece of clothing, a marking on an old grave. Photographer David Hurn explains a very important thing in the dialogue book with Bill Jay, “On Being a Photographer” from 2001, when he

claims that “if the images are not rooted in ‘the thing itself,’ to use Edward Weston’s term, then the photographer has not learned anything about the real world.” That is why it is essential to speak the multiple *languages* of photography, those different facets and purposes through which the image becomes not only a document, but also poetry, testimony, reflection, and a form of knowledge.

If one does not understand this alphabet, one will take only pictures of objects, like in a catalogue (which, in fairness, has its merits), but if you do, you photograph *signs, indicators of existence and life*. Here, the pastoral dimension of Romanian life and culture still has deep roots, so, as an exercise and learning project, it is a very practical environment to discover and shoot. Even though we can legitimately speak about the upgrade of the village, about modernization and changes, the foundation remains and is still very visible and strong. And this is, in many ways, the goal of the photographic project, to maintain these roots and to promote and pass them along as strong as they once were. Without strong roots, any tree will fall to the ground.

Religion writer Mircea Eliade said in an essay that there is a thirst of eternity that crosses along all nations and peoples. While he discussed nationalism, he mentioned clearly that he does not speak of it in political terms, as a love for the dead and the land,



but “a thirst for eternity” that belongs to all peoples. We can see this applied to what we discovered in Lăpuș Land, where there is a strong sense of a desire to *remain*, of a continuity which makes a dance today be a relative to a dance of 200 years ago and a hill that we photograph today can present itself to us as if untouched by history.

And so, by obtaining such insights into photography and its role, and its practice from theory to practice, we can see its multi-dimensional use and purposes. Thus, we can speak of photography as memory, as a way of immortalizing unique events, as documenting the present (which little by little becomes history) through pictures that showcase architecture, climate, weather, geography, living conditions and landscapes. Photography is also a tool for our anthropologists colleagues, who can use it as data sources and is also a strong sociological tool for research in human society, group relations, tourism, wealth, happiness as well as human universals.

Going back to Sontag, we can definitely thus agree with her stance in the “Melancholy Objects” essay, in which she makes the pertinent claim that “some photographers set up as scientists, others as moralists. The scientists make an inventory of the world; the moralists concentrate on hard cases.”



Indeed, photography becomes a treasure hunt, as photo essays and photo diaries can serve as a bonding experience, a tool for understanding and a connection device. In all these senses, photography, especially candid photography, is a great teacher. It invites us to contemplate on a moment that has been cut out of time and preserved. Photography in general, and street and documentary photography in

particular serve as blank canvas, which is then painted and which invites the viewer to ask himself about why each element is present where it is. Just as in a painting every element is carefully placed by the artist, in photography, things are “placed” by people and by time, as well as by fate and, through the eye of the photographer, they invite us to guess their role and purpose: why is a scythe leaning by the wall, why do shadows fall a certain way on the threshold, why are colors mixed a certain way and not another. This way, a candid photograph does not only fix a moment on a surface, but opens up an entire discussion on presence, sense and memory.

### **Parting Words**

In the end, I would like to propose a few personal thoughts on this experience, in the hope that others will also take from them.

What I did not know was that I did not carry Lăpuș Land in pictures, but that Lăpuș Land took me in a form of continuity. The images, I thought, would fix the memory in place; but, in fact, the place fixed me in a memory larger than mine. I realized that my photos were, in the end, signs that I had been admitted, even for a moment, in the natural order of a space which knows how to maintain its eternity in the most simple of things. In this sense, I did not photograph the past, but I was in a way captured by a place, in which life, through people, symbols, gestures, light, unveils itself for what it is: it is a quiet thirst and longing to remain - in eternity.

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## A Journey into the Heart of Maramureș

**Faustyna ZALEŚNA**

*The Pontifical University of “John Paul II” in Krakow, POLAND*

My stay in Târgu Lăpuș during the Transilvania Creative Camp 2025 (TCC 2025) opened a window to the soul of Maramureș, Romania—a land where ancient traditions breathe alongside the modern world. As part of a Blended Intensive



Program organized by Transilvania University of Brașov, our group of around thirty international students ventured into this northern Transylvanian gem, famous for its wooden churches, forested hills, and resilient mountain communities. What started as an academic endeavor blossomed into a heartfelt exploration of culture, nature, and human connection, leaving me with memories that feel like chapters from a living fairytale.

### **Discovering local warmth**

The locals' genuine warmth transformed every encounter. In a secluded mining village perched high in the green hills, initial shyness gave way to open-hearted hospitality. Residents welcomed us into their modest homes, sharing tales of mining heritage passed down through generations, offering sips of homemade plum brandy, and proudly presenting jars of fresh honey straight from their hives. Their humility shone through—no grand displays, just authentic kindness that bridged

language gaps with smiles and gestures. This raw openness taught me that true cultural exchange thrives on mutual curiosity and respect, not polished performances.

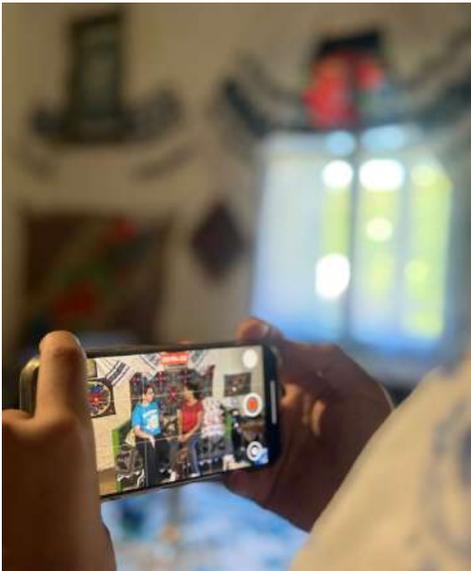
### **Bonds in nature and adventure**

Our diverse group became a microcosm of Europe, forging unbreakable bonds over shared bus rides through misty valleys and lively dinners filled with laughter. Hiking trails led us to breathtaking viewpoints where endless seas of forest stretched silently, interrupted only by distant cowbells, a moment of profound peace amid wildflowers and fresh mountain air. The anthropological field studies were highlights paired with local high school students, we knocked on villagers' doors, conducting interviews that revealed stories of self-sufficient farming, crafts, and family life. These interactions shattered comfort zones, sparking spontaneity like joining folk dances or tasting traditional cheeses, and highlighting the beauty of flexibility in cross-cultural dialogue.

### **Enduring magic**

Târgu Lăpuș, with its blend of agricultural rhythms and innovative spirit, captured my imagination as „MyLăpușland”—a magical haven of community-driven living. The program's structure wove education seamlessly with adventure: from group reflections on heritage preservation to immersive village visits that emphasized sustainability and pride in roots. The food was a revelation—heartwarming sarmale, creamy polenta, and seasonal fruits—while the people's ★★★★★ hospitality echoed the sentiments of fellow participants. Friendships bloomed with students from Portugal, Hungary, and Romania, turning cultural differences into shared wisdom.

This journey reshaped my perspective on global interconnectedness. Maramureș reminded me that hospitality stems from the heart, not wealth; that nature's quiet power grounds us; and that empathy turns strangers into family. The echoes of forest winds, the sweetness of shared honey, and the joy of newfound friends will linger forever. TCC 2025 proved why such initiatives matter—they don't just educate; they humanize the world, one welcoming village at a time. Mood: Deeply moved and eternally grateful.



#MYLÄPUŞ





**Bruno ANTÓNIO**

*Polytechnic Institute of Guarda, PORTUGAL*

I took part in a BIP in Romania for the second time. My first experience was in a more urban city, and this time in Târgu Lăpuș, a rural area, but it was just as positive. I met amazing people, experienced authentic Romanian culture, and felt very welcomed. It made me realize that even though we differ in some aspects, we all come together through connection, integration, and diversity, which truly reflects humanistic values.







**Jorge BERNAD-VICENTE**

*University of Zaragoza, SPAIN*

My time at TCC was full of learning opportunities, and it was there that I truly discovered the meaning of rural community. I strengthened my intercultural, communication and interdisciplinary skills by connecting with people from different parts of Europe who were genuinely committed to making a positive impact.







**Ana Pilar FAÑANÁS-BIESCAS**

*University of Zaragoza, SPAIN*

In the heart of Lăpuș Land, I found that the strongest stories are the ones we live together.

With every shared idea, I felt the power of collaboration crossing borders and generations.





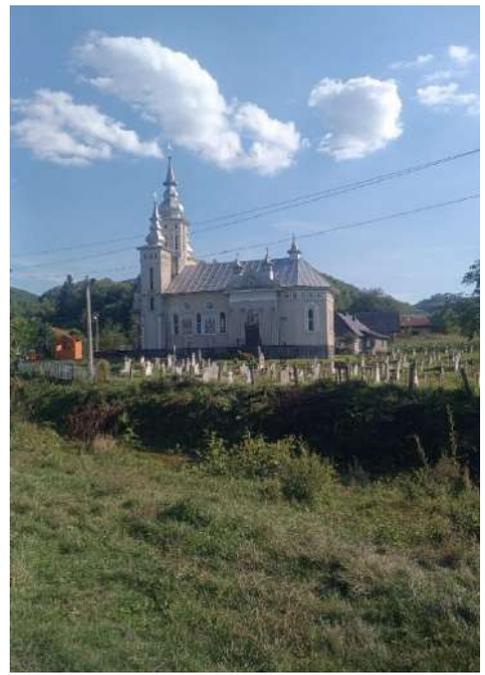


**Laura CASCÁN SAZ**

*University of Zaragoza, SPAIN*

The project has been an excellent experience. I have learned a great deal about Romanian culture and gained valuable insights. Additionally, I have significantly developed my social skills throughout this enriching journey.



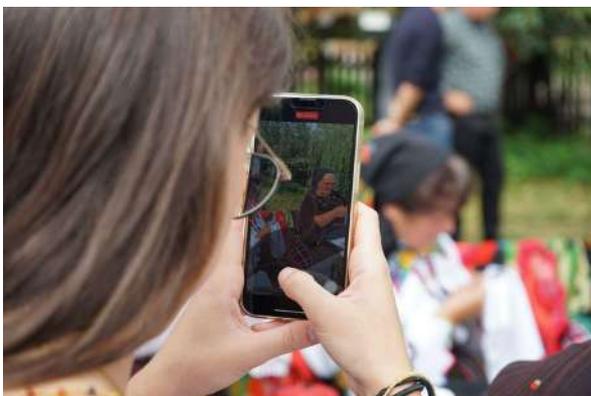




**Andra Elena DAN**

*Transilvania University of Braşov, ROMANIA*

The TCC 2025 project forged indelible bonds, transforming cultural apprehension into deep understanding. This intensive immersion achieved profound personal and academic convergence, establishing an enduring collective legacy.





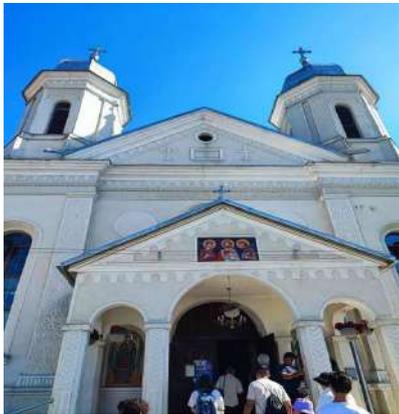


**Marius FILIP**

„Petru Rareș” Theoretical High School Târgu Lăpuș,  
ROMANIA

The Transilvania Creative Camp 2025 showed me a lifestyle built on hard work, trust, and tradition. I met people who truly appreciate their community, and seeing how they live gave me a new perspective on what it means to stay connected to your own roots.







## Chiara GAGLIARDI

*Università Politecnica delle Marche, ITALY*

In Romania, I learned that certain places do not simply belong to a specific time. Through this Erasmus experience, I had the chance to share days, paths, and silences with remarkable people, whose presence gave depth and warmth to every place we visited. Lands like Lăpuș revealed ways of living far from my own—slower, more rooted, shaped by gestures and traditions I would have never encountered otherwise. These moments felt suspended, as if detached from the urgency of the modern world, allowing me to truly be present. This journey opened doors to landscapes and forms of life that would have remained unknown to me without it.







**Daphne GERODIMOU**

*University of Savoie Mont Blanc, FRANCE*

*University of Zaragoza, SPAIN*

The Romanian countryside, vibrant green meadows, stacks of hay, weddings, music, dancing, wooden churches, forest hikes, and endless laughter. This journey was truly unique in every sense of the word. A recurring joke was that we were living inside an adventure game, never knowing where the next minute would take us, and that feeling is one I will cherish and deeply miss.







## Diogo Gonçalo MARTINS LEITE

*Instituto Politécnico da Guarda, PORTUGAL*

Undoubtedly, Romania was more than an experience, it was a rare state of being. There, I didn't quite know who I was or who I would become. Each day carried its own weight, as if life wasn't passing by me, but happening *with* me. It was an interval in which experiences seemed more real, carrying significance and presence. Returning hurt, and that pain only confirmed the value of what was lived, something touched me at a level I hadn't known before, and a piece of me opened without asking for permission. I carry with me smiles, shining eyes, people, and the energy that flowed within us. Not as fleeting memories, but as a permanent echo, eternal not in time, but in what within me can no longer go back.







**Stefan HERGHELEGIU**

*Transilvania University of Brasov, ROMANIA*

The most exciting experience I have been a part of.

Mood: excited

Area: amazing

Food: impressive

People: ★ ★ ★ ★ ★







**Pascal HOLL**

*Stuttgart Media University, GERMANY*

My time at the TCC was truly unforgettable. Lăpuș Land revealed itself as a place of wild, untouched beauty, where nature and traditions are deeply connected. Through long days in the field and breathtaking drone images, I experienced the landscape from perspectives

I had never known before .







**Flóra KISS**

*University of Dunaújváros, Hungary*

During my visit to Târgu Lăpuș, I was able to gain insights into self-sufficient living, and I also experienced the love and dedication of the locals to their community. This region has forever stolen my heart with its impressive traditions and agricultural activities.







**Ștefan MIHOLCA**

“Petru Rareș” Theoretical High School Târgu Lăpuș,  
ROMANIA

My experience at this camp was truly memorable. Over the course of a week filled with adventure and emotion, I had the opportunity to discover places in the area where I was born that I had not known about before, and to realize that each of them carries its own story. This experience not only enriched my knowledge of my homeland, but also helped me see these places with new eyes, with greater curiosity and appreciation.







**Denisa MIHUȚ**

*„Petru Rareș” Theoretical High School Târgu Lăpuș, ROMANIA*

Participating in the Transilvania Creative Camp 2025 was more than just an experience. I got a real look at a lifestyle built on self-sufficiency, strong values and tradition, shaped by people who truly care about their community.







**Vivien NAGY**

*University of Dunaújváros, HUNGARY*

For me, the camp was a completely new experience. It was wonderful to meet such amazing people. We had a really good time, and we were able to visit many amazing places that I hope everyone will have the chance to see one day. Our group focused on folklore. We had to take photos of traditional clothing, food, and furniture in traditional houses. We had one day when we visited the houses of local residents, and they were really nice. Some groups even got to sit on a tractor, and some of them were offered warm food as well. We even went to a farm where we could pet sheep and cows. The lady who lived there with her husband showed us how she washes clothes in the small river.

TCC was a wonderful experience, and I am grateful for having been there.







## Pal PALOTAS

*University of Dunaújváros, HUNGARY*

I had heard stories about rural life in general: that at a wedding no one is a stranger, everyone is welcome, and even the cows find their way home on their own. It was in Lăpuș Land that I truly experienced what this means in real life. Being there felt like a journey back in time. Since gastronomy and pálinka distilling are real passions of mine, this experience meant a lot to me. Here, food



and drink are not just made by following recipes, but with care, patience, and love. Every bite and every sip carried the work and spirit of the people who created them. During TCC2025, I also had the chance to build strong international friendships and

meaningful connections, which made the whole experience even more special. Everything was done with heart and real passion. Even today, a single taste or aroma can take me back to that place, where life felt slower, more real, and where I lived one of the most memorable experiences of my life.







**Andrei POP**

“Petru Rareș” Theoretical High School Târgu Lăpuș,  
ROMANIA

My participation in this camp helped me understand that the world is much bigger than I thought before. Interacting with people from different cultures and backgrounds gave me a new perspective and made me realize that people can have different expectations of us. This experience helped me become more mature and aware of the way I communicate and relate to others.







**Vlad Ștefan POP**

„Petru Rareș” Theoretical High School Târgu Lăpuș,  
ROMANIA

From a high school student’s perspective, this camp was an enriching educational experience that helped me develop my creativity, communication skills, and ability to work effectively in a team. I also met many wonderful people, from whom I gained new perspectives on life as well as valuable insights related to my field of interest. Overall, this experience meant a lot to me, as it allowed me to explore more deeply the region where I live and to discover the traditions specific to each locality.







**Bárbara SILVA**

*University of Dunaújváros, HUNGARY*

During my visit to Târgu Lăpuș for the TCC 2025, I was deeply inspired by the locals' warmth, dedication, and community spirit. Their lifestyle, rooted in tradition yet open to innovation, made the experience unforgettable. I'll always remember the amazing friends I shared this

journey with.







**Ximena VAZQUEZ BASULTO**

*Université Savoie Mont Blanc, FRANCE*

“Every family has a story. Welcome to ours.”

This phrase perfectly captures my experience in Târgu Lăpuș, TCC 2025. Each person I met shared a piece of their world. I felt warmly welcomed, invited to discover their stories as if I had become part of their community.







**Maria Jose TEJADA PRIETO**

*Université Savoie Mont Blanc, FRANCE*

My time at the TCC was a truly enriching experience that allowed me to explore Romanian culture in a meaningful way. Each day offered new activities through which I discovered local traditions from different perspectives. The classes enhanced my communication skills, particularly in relation to tourism. In addition, the intercultural environment made the experience both academically and personally valuable.







**Iosif TRIF**

*Transilvania University of Braşov, ROMANIA*

In Romania, it is said that eternity is born in the countryside. Writer Mircea Eliade once claimed that there exists a type of eternity that is like a leap beyond history, through which a people and a land enter and can remain forever. Lăpuş Land feels like that to me: not just a place where the past and the present meet, but it seems to be a fragment of eternity, enduring beyond time and the material world.







**José Antonio VISIEDO RUBIO**

*Zaragoza, SPAIN*

Among landscapes rich in memory and voices from different generations, I experienced how collaboration becomes a living legacy. In Lăpuș Land, time slows down, and what truly matters comes into focus: people, shared moments, and the stories we build together.







**Krisztina SITKU**

*University of Dunaújváros, HUNGARY*

Târgu Lăpuș and Țara Lăpușului have reconnected me with my childhood's forgotten world: a peaceful, enchanting, timeless place where Nature is part of the everyday, where cultures merge, and where honest work and fundamental

human values rule the day. A safe haven from hectic modern life.





With gratitude to our hosts in Lăpuș Land

















