

## Effective Experiential Learning in The Artificial Intelligence Age

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### ABSTRACT

This reflection on our teaching of an overseas experiential learning course in the College of Alice & Peter Tan (CAPT) in the last academic year aims to illustrate how experiential learning can address concerns about students' reliance on the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in higher education. The current discourse on AI-augmented teaching and learning practice in higher education has raised considerable focus on *filtering* the AI-generated information to translate it into authentic knowledge. Reflecting on our own teaching, we claim that *experiential learning* can be an effective filter to help students learn in this AI-age education environment. We intentionally redesigned an assignment and thereby introduced a 'creative disruption' to the course. Describing the design, we present the findings from systematically analysing students' work using the programme learning outcomes as the lens. This reflection focuses on one of the significant findings on a crucial learning outcome – critical thinking. The discussion elaborates how it has been achieved in the course. This evidence-based reflective analysis demonstrates that when classroom boundaries are crossed, and epistemic access is thoughtfully broadened, students can cultivate higher-order thinking skills like interpreting and explaining complexities, applying knowledge from the perspectives gained, empathising with the other (culture/community) and increasing self-knowledge.

**Keywords:** Overseas experiential learning, Critical thinking, Filtering AI-generated information

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## INTRODUCTION

The current discourse on AI-augmented teaching and learning practice in higher education has raised considerable focus on 'AI literacy' (Eager & Brunton, 2023; Ng et al., 2023) as an emerging skill in education. Being AI literate necessitates having the knowledge to safely and constructively use AI tools like ChatGPT to improve education and support students' learning (Baidoo-anu & Ansah, 2023; Eager & Brunton, 2023). In a recent talk by Ricky Kwok on embracing the 'AI Renaissance'<sup>1</sup>, he argued that educators need to think of AI as their collaborator rather than a competitor. He further deconstructed the concept of collaboration by explaining the three 'A' (3A) approach to assess the AI-generated information – Accountable, Actionable, Advancing. What struck us most was the discussion on how to teach students to *filter* AI-generated information using the 3A approach to translate it into authentic knowledge. However, the crucial questions are what these filters can be and how we can design them to enhance their impact on effective teaching and learning.

Reflecting on our own teaching, we claim that *experiential learning* can be an effective filter to help students learn in this AI-age education environment. If pedagogies can be thoughtfully and intentionally designed with the learning context and the learners in mind, students' critical and ethical AI literacy can be developed. However, simply conceptualising the relationship between experiential learning and AI literacy without proper practice models in teaching is not adequate to realise the benefits from these interventions. Evidence-based reflection, using a specific teaching aspect as a case example, can potentially contribute to building this understanding.

We conducted an overseas experiential STEER<sup>2</sup> -based course<sup>3</sup> in the College of Alice & Peter Tan (CAPT) during semester 1 of AY2023/24. The course explored the concepts, practices and issues in community development in relation to the culture and conservation of natural resources and heritage in the context of Nepal. Following the CAPT STEER learning tradition (Mukhopadhyay et al., 2022), we offered students an interactive learning opportunity that combined theory, classroom-based seminars and field trips. During the 13-day field trip to Nepal with visits to academic institutions, non-government organisations, social businesses and communities, students critically examined discourses on the dilemmas and designs of community development as well as the ethical, social, and economic challenges of the different models. The intended learning outcomes of the course collectively supported the University Town College Programme (UTCP)'s overall goals of developing critical thinking, cultivating the appreciation of complexity, honing effective communication and demonstrating personal and social responsibility.

The assignments, pre-trip peer presentations, post-trip photo reflection essay and documentary production and pre-and-post-trip blogging, were structured intentionally to promote a deeper engagement of students in the learning process throughout the course. For the peer presentations, students conducted research on the various partner organisations and institutions and sites to be visited to gather information that contextualised the work and appreciated the geography and culturally different societies.

Inspired by an idea from a senior and experienced colleague<sup>4</sup>, we intentionally redesigned the blog assignment in this run and thereby, in the words of Ricky Kwok, made a 'creative disruption' to the course. Previously, the blogs served as a medium to reflect and document

the learning journey, where students would write blog posts based on the different pre-trip seminars as well as engagements and visits across the study trip. For this iteration, we integrated the blog writing into the peer presentation assignment in the following way. Students were required to write two blog posts on the same topic (site/organisation/institution) that they presented at two different time points – pre-trip and post-trip. The former was based on their research, and the latter was based on their experience. **Figure 1** below depicts a snapshot of the blog assignment guide.

### Blog Entry (10%)

This assignment aims to provide students an opportunity to take ownership of their learning through inquiry, critical analysis and reflection.

You are required to complete **two** blog entries (*within 400-500 words each*) with your *peer/group* at two different time points of the course (pre-trip and trip). The guiding details are as follows:

#### 1. Blog entry (pre-trip)

This first blog entry should be related to your topic of oral presentation, based on your *research* and guided by the following questions:

- What are the main ideas/arguments?
- What struck you as interesting and important?
- What questions, dilemmas and/or insights for community/culture/conservation did your *research* raise? To what degree did they align or clash with your understanding of these concepts?

You are highly recommended to use ChatGPT to gather information on your topic area, critically analyse the information and incorporate that into your entry.

#### 2. Blog entry (trip)

This second blog entry should be related to your topic of oral presentation and based on your *experiences* during the trip and guided by the following questions:

- What are the main ideas/arguments?
- What struck you as interesting and important?
- What answers/evidence did you find to your questions, dilemmas and/or insights for community/culture/conservation that your *experiences* showed? To what degree did they align or clash with your *research* on these concepts?

There is no prescriptive format for the blog entries. It is designed to help you achieve deep learning by analysing, questioning and reflecting on existing information and on-the-ground knowledge. It also provides an opportunity to challenge any preconceived notions and explore your passions.

Your entries should include **3 to 5 photos** that are relevant to the content.

Any other embellishments – videos, poems, paintings, etc. (self-creations or sourced from outside with proper credits) – can be included, but not required. Cultivate your creative and reflective self!

**Figure 1.** Pre-and-post trip blog entry guide.

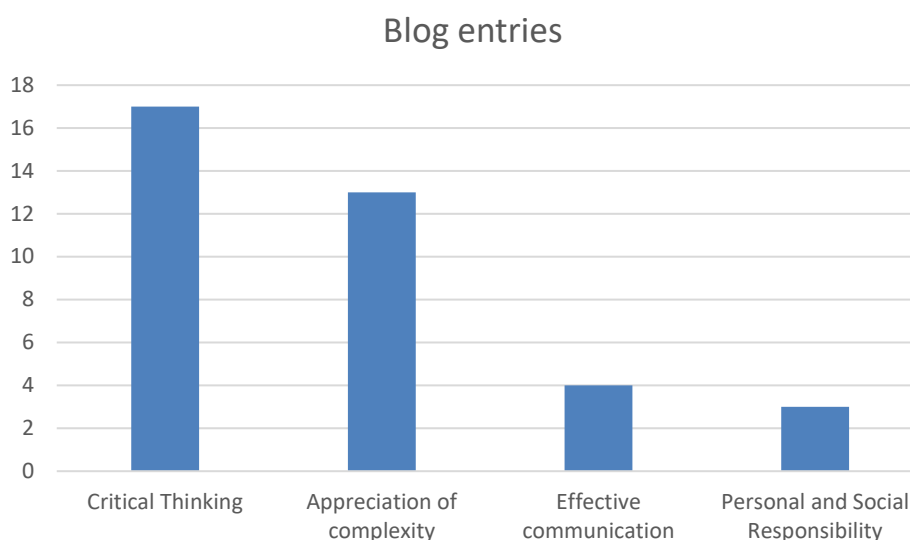
For the pre-trip blog entry, students were *strongly advised* to use Gen-AI to gather, critically analyse and synthesise the information on the area of their presentation topics, and during the trip, test the findings and incorporate the comparative learning (conforming/contrasting knowledge) in their post-trip blog entry.

The open-ended format of the blog assignment deepened student learning by combining formal and informal writing tasks as different genres affect different parts of the brain (Zull, 2002, as cited in Bean, 2011). The comparative style of the assignment adopted two learning-oriented principles – one, inclusion of ‘personal investment’ which encouraged ‘student agency’ and two, building awareness and a clear understanding of expectations and criteria of the experiential learning programme (Carless, 2015, p.32). We encouraged the students to use the blogs as a medium of expressing, testing and applying the knowledge gained.

A comparative analysis of the blog entries in pairs – pre-trip and post-trip – using the UTCP learning outcomes as the lens, was conducted, and the productive affordances of the *experiential learning filter* were clearly uncovered. We used the UTCP learning outcomes adapted for the course as analytical codes to deconstruct the pre-trip and post-trip blog entries (**Table 1**). We coded the entire data individually and then conducted inter-coder reliability exercises to derive the significant findings. The overwhelming impact on developing critical thinking and building an appreciation of complexity was evident in the blogs, as shown in **Figure 2** below. A summary of the comparative blog analysis (Student-pair-#) is provided in the **appendix (A-Blog)**.

**Table 1.** UTCP learning outcomes adapted in analysing pre-trip and post-trip blog entries

<b>Critical Thinking:</b> Students will understand community development, culture, and conservation-related issues from different perspectives as they engage with diverse partner organisations/ institutions and communities. Through these engagements, students will be able to reflect on the assumptions and norms that shape their thinking, and be open to a change in perspective and ideas that promote innovative solutions to global and social issues.
<b>Appreciation of Complexity:</b> Students will be able to identify and appreciate the cultural, historical, economic, political and social factors involved in community development and conservation practices in Nepal and learn to value the diversity of identities, perspectives and opinions.
<b>Effective Communication:</b> Students will learn to compare and critically assess the interplay of tradition and innovation in community development and conservation concepts, perspectives and practices to become aware and develop empathy for other people’s situations and contexts, and build respect for others’ arguments.
<b>Personal and Social Responsibility:</b> Through the classroom discussions and field visits, students will develop intercultural understanding as they explore concepts of culture and revisit common stereotypes and dominant scholarship about Nepal (Hofstede et al., 2010). Reflecting on the insights gained, students will be able to demonstrate their intercultural knowledge and competence in attitude and practice.



**Figure 2.** UTCP intended learning outcomes exhibited through the blog entries

The high proportion of evidence of critical thinking skills and appreciation of complexity exhibited in the blog entries stood testimony to the epistemic access (borrowing from Descartes’ epistemic privilege philosophy<sup>5</sup>) that students received through the experiential

learning journey. In this reflection, 'critical thinking' has been elaborated in the following sections to substantiate the argument.

## DISCUSSION

### Achieving Critical Thinking through Experiential Learning

The blog entries had clear indications of achieving the critical thinking learning outcome. For instance, the students' interactions with a partner who worked with marginalised women gave them opportunities to explain and evaluate what they had read about the sustainability and conservation effort to build a community and what they witnessed in Nepal (**A-Blog - Student-pair-4**). The students' exposure to Namaste Community Foundation (NCF) allowed them to learn that the organisation had revisited and adapted programmes to meet the needs of the community. In their pre-trip blog entry, students reported learning that some of their initiatives, *'Ear Clinic and Buy-a-Brick...were discontinued'* (**A-Blog - Student-pair-4**), but they were unsure of the reason and what other efforts were put in place to empower the locals to build a community. During the trip, students learned that the clinic was terminated, and what NCF was doing to replace it to meet the demands of the local community. They reported in the post-trip blog that *'...inquiring with Mr Man-Singh {Manager from NCF}, we understood...NCF strategically designs projects to address community-based needs within constraints of its existing resources'* (**A-Blog - Student-pair-4**). They further elaborated their new knowledge with critical analysis and drawing connections with the literature that they had read during the pre-trip seminars and their own research. In their words, *'...NCF...not just...a passive recipient of global ideas transmitted through international support. ...is committed to frequently revising and adapting programmes according to shifting needs, ...serve to spark wider structural change on international levels (Bhandari, 2014).'* (**A-Blog - Student-pair-4**)

Another significant example was students' exposure to the ground-up effort by another partner organisation based in the Annapurna region, which deepened their critical understanding from listening to the local leaders and residents' perspectives. In this example, the students in their pre-trip blog entry simply reported that tourism was the primary income source to sustain the local economy in Nepal. During the trip, students witnessed how tourism sustained the local economies in rural communities such as Ghandruk and Bhujung villages in the Annapurna region. They learnt how the local communities used the funds to conserve the environment and local traditions. The students reported that *'The segregation of waste, with a focus on recycling, showcased a tangible commitment to environmental conservation within the local business community.'* (**A-Blog - Student-pair-5**). Furthermore, through our homestay in Bhujung village, students learned that the locals actively engaged in forest protection efforts and reported that they *'played a vital role in safeguarding the forests by promptly informing<sup>6</sup>...about illegal activities within the forested areas. This dynamic collaboration exemplified a beautiful balance between income generation through tourism and the conservation of vital forest ecosystems'* (**A-Blog - Student-pair-6**). Students understood and demonstrated this understanding in their post-trip blog: *'The intertwined success stories in Bhujung'* (**A-Blog - Student-pair-6**). Students were able to appreciate why Nepalis valued their practices and were open to accepting the change in their perspective.

The findings from the comparative analysis of the pre-trip and post-trip blog entries provide evidence on the positive impact of the intentional pedagogical interventions on authentic

learning in an experiential intercultural course. The significant demonstration of critical thinking as the learning outcome indicated that the pedagogical strategies of curating programmes and scaffolding learning enabled students to achieve deep learning (Ritchhart et. al., 2011). For instance, we categorically organised interactions with community members like wood carving artisans during our engagement with partner organisations, and conversation time with youth on sustainable projects through organising presentations and a colloquium with higher education institutions. These in-person interactions and dialogue-based learning afforded authentic learning, which AI research is inadequate in fulfilling. The emphasis was given to assess and evaluate the information gathered during the pre-trip through AI-assisted research, with the knowledge gathered through experience during the trip. The effectiveness of the intentionality of the pedagogy was demonstrated in the relevant, appropriate, meaningful and thought-provoking style of writing. This was projected through the questions they asked during pre-trip seminars and the answers they pursued during the trip. They substantiated their writing using real stories, like mentioning 'Ashma' and 'Sonu' in explaining the women's agency and development projects (**A-Blog - Student-pair-5**), which also further substantiated the authentic elements gained in this experiential learning.

Through the change in the style of writing for the pre-trip and the trip blog entries, there was evidence of authentic learning gained. For instance, students gave broad definitions and descriptions of the place and the organisation in the pre-trip blog entries, while after they had experienced it, the descriptions moved towards more details of what they saw. For example, descriptions like 'busy streets' and 'two-storey building' were included (STEER Nepal 2023 Blog).

The findings support the premise that the intentional pedagogical interventions specific to the experiential learning programme generated deep learning among students. Despite the subjective and interpretive nature of their understandings, these interventions contributed to meaningful shifts in the students' perspectives. This cognitive transformation was an outcome of the experiential learning and reflection exercises used as focused pedagogical interventions in the course, signifying the importance and relevance of such authentic learning platforms in today's digital world.

## CONCLUSIONS

This reflection on our teaching practice highlighted that, whether it is inside or outside the classroom, providing opportunities to cross the border from comfort to learning zones (Senninger, 2000) raised students' awareness about the unknowns. They prompted them to understand and appreciate the epistemic access that experiential learning afforded, and they could evaluate their own beliefs and knowledge in new ways. Scaffolding their learning with a thoughtful integration of intentional designs in the pedagogies allowed them to be critically aware and enhanced higher-order thinking skills like interpreting and explaining complexities, applying knowledge from the perspectives gained, empathising with the *other* (culture/community) and increasing self-knowledge. Such study trips provide students with rich historical and cultural knowledge and experiences that AI tools are still unable to produce.

## ENDNOTES

1. SoTL-Asia Talk Series 2024 - Friday, 7 June 2024; 10 – 11 am (Online)
2. “From Turing to GPT: Venturing into the AI Renaissance and Experiencing its Impact on Human Literacy and Innovation”
3. Study Trips for Engagement & EnRichment (STEER) programme, under the Global Relations Office (GRO), NUS. <http://www.nus.edu.sg/gro/steer.php>
4. Dr Tan Lai Yong. He started the first STEER in CAPT in 2012 and has been one of the key faculty members in conceptualising, designing and conducting several CAPT STEER trips over the years to India, Myanmar and Botswana.
5. Descartes’ Epistemology in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy
6. Annapurna Conservation Area Project - a CAPT STEER Nepal partner organisation

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kankana Mukhopadhyay is Senior Lecturer and Resident Fellow in the College of Alice & Peter Tan at the National University of Singapore. Her background is in Education & Human Development. She values research in the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning (SoTL) and her interests span across different aspects like experiential learning, informal learning, learner-centric teaching, and Students-as-Partners in higher education. Her SoTL research work has appeared in several platforms including Journal of Higher Education Research, Development, Asia-Pacific Journal of Education Research and book chapters in IGI Global edited volume. Her work on SaP and learner centric teaching has recently appeared in two separate Routledge edited volumes and a Springer edited volume. She has extensive experience in pedagogical designs and implementation of short-term study trips to India and Nepal. Starting from 2015, she has co-led 9 such study trips as formal courses to these two countries. She has experience in both quantitative and qualitative research and her research work on education related projects have appeared in Sage Research Method Case Studies series.

Misty So-Sum WAI-Cook is Deputy Director & Senior Lecturer at the Centre for English Language Communication and Director of Student Life at the College of Alice & Peter Tan (CAPT). She is interested in working with students as partners, and has strong interest in student leadership. She has also conducted multiple research projects and published papers on academic literacies, tutor and peer feedback in language education, and the use of technologies to enhance teaching and learning. She is on the editorial board for Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Education and Journal of Underrepresented & Minority Progress.

Soon Fen Wong is Senior Lecturer, Director of Residential Life and Resident Fellow at Ridge View Residential College (RVRC), and Fellow at the College of Alice & Peter Tan. Her research and academic interests include language teaching, teacher education, living and learning programmes, experiential learning, mentoring, and educational work in developing countries. Her work has appeared in the New Ways in TESOL Series II, RELC Journal, The English Teacher, Asian Journal of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning and Routledge edited volume. She has extensive experience in pedagogical designs and implementation of short-term study trips to India, Nepal and Malaysia. Starting from 2014, she has co-led several such study trips as formal courses to these countries.

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## APPENDIX A-Blog

Pre-trip and post-trip blog entry extracts showing evidence of ‘critical thinking’ and ‘appreciation of complexity’

Peer Pairs	Pre trip entry	Trip entry
<p><b>Student-pair-4</b></p> <p>[critical thinking exhibited through evaluation of assumption that shows a deeper understanding of why development could have varying degrees of impact on the natural environment due to politics.</p> <p>Appreciation of complexity shown by acknowledging the danger of assuming universality of culture they value the diversity of culture/identities</p> <p>Style of writing and reflecting also indicates the authentic learning that has happened (pre-trip - broad definitions and descriptions Post-trip - more details of what they saw and experienced]</p>	<p><b>Ghandruk and ACAP</b></p> <p>We presented the Village of Ghandruk in the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) region of Nepal. Ghandruk, known for its cultural diversity and breathtaking natural geography, has witnessed a surge towards international popularity over the years. As tourism boomed in the village, there was increasing demand for firewood and hiking trails. It came to a point where the woods were steadily being cleared and the biodiversity of the area suffered from the paths and garbage left behind. Ghandruk’s economy seemed to be growing at the expense of its natural resources.</p> <p>...Our research in understanding the changes in Ghandruk allowed us to explore two concepts: Development and Culture.</p> <p>...</p>	<p><b>Ghandruk and ACAP 2</b></p> <p>Our field visit to Ghandruk, Nepal, presented additional information that corroborated and conflicted with our prior online research, giving us new insights into questions and discussions previously raised. This follow-up blog contains our key learnings.</p> <p><b>Development</b></p> <p>In our pre-trip blog post Blog Entry ... “we questioned whether infrastructure development, a clear and tangible form of change, could always be considered development” as it may not always have its intended outcomes in Nepal’s turbulent political landscape. In Ghandruk, we asked Mr Bhim Prasad Upadhyay, A Senior Natural Resources Conservation Assistant at the National Trust for Nature Conservation’s Annapurna Conservation Area Project (NTNC-ACAP), about the impacts of many (motorable) roads we observed between mountainside settlements. Mr Bhim explained that these roads increased the accessibility of new remote settlements and the overall connectivity of Ghandruk. ...</p> <p><b>Culture</b></p> <p>Previously, we questioned “what culture is,” and explored the case of Theater dances performed in Ghandruk. Unexpectedly, in Ghandruk, we saw no such performance. Furthermore, our lodge owners knew little about the supposedly popular dance. The owners only knew of the Nepalese national instrument used in Theater dances, the Madal. Initially, this</p>

Peer Pairs	Pre trip entry	Trip entry
		<p>made us doubt the rigorousness and accuracy of online sources - even documentaries, such as the one we referred to for Theater dance (Bhakari Events Pvt Ltd Pokhara , 2022).</p> <p>However, by reflecting on this conflict between expectation and reality, we arrived at another hypothesis. We had been assuming that Ghandruk had one unanimous culture. Yet, as Abril, a Tribhuvan University student, emphasised, Ghandruk spans a vast area encompassing numerous villages and mountains. As such, Theater dance may be performed and celebrated in another village in Ghandruk instead of the one we stayed at. We cannot expect a single story of culture, whether seen online or experienced in a particular village, to be representative of the whole of Ghandruk (we mean 'single story' as expressed by Achidie, 2009). Seeing this vastness and diversity of culture in Ghandruk or even Nepal, we realise we must proceed with a certain humility and refrain from careless generalisations.</p> <p>...</p>
<p><b>Student-pair-5</b></p> <p>[Critical thinking and appreciation of complexity exhibited through identifying how organisations revisit and adapt programmes to meet the needs of the community.</p> <p>Style of writing and reflecting also indicates the authentic learning that has happened (pre-trip - broad definitions and descriptions Post-trip - more details of what they saw and experienced]</p>	<p><b>Namaste Community Foundation</b></p> <p>...</p> <p>Through its carefully designed initiatives in residential programmes for children, women's skill training programmes, and educational scholarship programmes (Namaste Community Foundation, 2023), NCF goes beyond mere aid, to confront systemic challenges intertwined with traditional gender roles and address the concerns of vulnerable communities like single women and children.</p> <p>...Something that struck to us was that NCF offers a diverse</p>	<p><b>Pohkara and Namaste Community Foundation</b></p> <p>...We visited the Women Empowerment Program (WEP).</p> <p>...At WEP, we met Sonu and Ashma, recent enrollees of the programme. Despite her tender age, Ashma expressed her desire to establish a business rather than working for someone else. Her firm resolve demonstrates a sense of agency in decision-making for her future, and our hope is for her to be empowered and to realise her dreams.</p> <p>...Visiting NCF, we gained valuable insights into NCF's programmes.</p>

Peer Pairs	Pre trip entry	Trip entry
	<p>range of programmes, yet some, such as the Professional Support Program and Ear Clinic (Namaste Community Foundation, 2023), are currently unavailable with no specified reopening date. The reasons behind this closure prompt questions about the significance of these programmes and the magnitude of their impact, and the factors that led to their discontinuation.</p>	<p>... From our pre- trip research, we realised that the Ear Clinic and Buy-a-Brick initiatives were discontinued. After inquiring with Mr Man-Singh, we understood that NCF strategically designs projects to address community-based needs within constraints of its existing resources. Similar to other Nepali NGOs, NCF seems to not just be a passive recipient of global ideas transmitted through international support. ...</p>
<p><b>Student-pair-6</b></p> <p><b>[Critical thinking and appreciation of complexity</b> exhibited through identifying how organisations work bottom-up</p> <p>Style of writing and reflecting also indicates the authentic learning that has happened (pre-trip - broad definitions and descriptions Post-trip - more details of what they saw and experienced]</p>	<p><b>The Complex Reality of Annapurna Conservation Area (ACA)</b></p> <p>Bhujung, Nepal's largest Gurung village, is one of the many villages in the Annapurna Conservation Area (ACA). Their economy mainly builds upon agriculture, while tourism has been growing increasingly prominent. To maintain this sustainable growth, the ACA embodies a pioneering conservation strategy firmly rooted in an integrated, community-based approach to conservation and development [Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP), 2023]. At its core, ACAP recognises that the participation and well-being of local communities are pivotal to the success of conservation efforts. This holistic approach seeks to harmonise the economic progress of these communities with the preservation of precious natural paramount and social issues to have been meticulously addressed in ACAP's planning process. This therefore raises questions about the scalability and adaptability of ACAP's approach in the long-run.</p> <p>...</p>	<p><b>Harmony in the Himalayas: Navigating Community-Based Conservation and Unveiling Realities in Bhujung</b></p> <p>Our heart-warming experience of witnessing Nepal's community-based approach to conservation, particularly exemplified by the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP), was marked by insights and inspiring encounters. In contrast to top-down approaches in many countries, Nepal's bottom-up strategy was evident through various initiatives when we visited the different partners, mirroring the ethos of ACAP.</p> <p>...During our stay at Hotel Milan, the owner shared practices that underscored ACAP's impact. The segregation of waste, with a focus on recycling showcased a tangible commitment to environmental conservation within the local business community.</p> <p>In a similar vein, homestays served as one of the major sources of income for the locals in Bhujung village. The success of this collaboration was uncovered during our exploration of the village. ...</p>