

## Mapping the Permaculture Education Ecosystem

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There is a wide spectrum of permaculture education formats in use across many communities and by many permaculture educators. This diverse spread of formats has been a result of the huge increase in interest in permaculture in the last decade, the increase in people with varied backgrounds and training levels teaching in different ways, as well as a recognition of the need to meet more needs and get permaculture into different communities.

This mapping of the permaculture education ecosystem (see graphic) was done as part of a meeting of permaculture teachers, designers and organizers from around the Northeast U.S. at Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, NY, in October 2014. Participants brainstormed the ecosystem elements and noted questions, opportunities, concerns and patterns. There have been many of these conversations over the years with the goal of better understanding what courses are offered within and beyond the region and how to better serve learners and get permaculture out to wider audiences. The permaculture network is very dispersed and dynamic. It is not something to be controlled, but rather worked with. As we identify opportunities to build a stronger education ecosystem and fill missing niches, we can ensure quality and vibrancy in permaculture education.

The group recognized a critical aspect of permaculture education was first *inspiration* (excitement, recognizing the need and potential to positively affect change) which would then lead to *empowerment* (the preparedness and readiness to affect change in their own lives and communities) and then finally get to *proficiency* (skills and abilities to do the work in the world they are inspired to).

Because of the way permaculture has developed with the establishment of the 14-day, 72-hour, Permaculture Design Course (PDC) as the primary conduit for learning permaculture, this central course dominates the discussion of permaculture education. There seems to be a general belief that this is the main pathway to learning permaculture. The residential PDC was for some time the primary format for permaculture education, and the widespread name recognition and a recognized certificate has led to much focus on the PDC. Some would say too much focus.

Permaculture is considered by some to be elitist and inaccessible due to the cost and time required for a PDC. The diversification of the course is partially a reflection of this. Recognizing that the PDC cannot reach many audiences the way it had been taught, as a two-week residential course, there has been a stretching and adapting of the PDC format such that it is now taught in many ways, with differing curricula, focus, time periods, and education goals. There are a huge range of different courses each giving the same certificate. Who can

teach a PDC and give a certificate is a hot topic with differing opinions throughout the larger network.

One design approach to regulating the PDC certificate, is a diploma system and an organization that certifies the teachers and designers (e.g. Permaculture Institute of North America). At the Omega retreat, we discussed a more “crowd-sourced” approach, where a database could offer prospective students information about courses, teachers and student feedback. Teachers could take a voluntary “pledge” to cover some core curriculum and core competencies agreed upon through an open process within the permaculture education community.

### **Elements of the Permaculture Education Ecosystem:**

Internet, websites and videos (e.g. YouTube)

Books and magazines

Tours and field trips

Convergences and conferences

Short workshops (1 hour to 2-3 days)

Medium-length trainings (e.g. UPAT-NYC, 3-8 days)

PDC in various formats - weekends, modular, online-distance (10-30 days)

Online courses

Advanced Trainings - Advanced PDC, Teacher Training (5-10 days, variable length)

Apprentice, WWOOFing, volunteer, work-trade

Land-based learning centers (e.g. Kinstone)

Diploma Programs (1 to 3 years)

Academia - short courses, semester courses, symposia

Undergraduate degree, advanced degree, professional training (e.g. Conway School of Landscape Planning and Design)

Guilds, local, regional and international network (e.g. Permaculture Institute of the Northeast, European Permaculture Teachers Partnership), network learning

As permaculture designers, we have an understanding of the resilience of diverse and interconnected ecosystems. Mapping the permaculture education ecosystem illuminates numerous observations and opportunities:

1. The diversity of learning formats and approaches IS a dynamic, evolving ecosystem. There are gaps and overlaps, which may be seen as problems, and which also offer opportunities and unexplored niches.
2. Overlap and redundancies in offerings can push towards getting out to wider audiences and create innovation leading to diversifying and creativity.
3. Various “pathways” can be used by learners to reach diverse education goals.
4. Sometimes learners have clear goals and sometimes they don't.
5. It is not necessary to become a permaculture designer to bring permaculture into whatever life path one chooses.

6. There are more opportunities for advanced training, and yet in some places, opportunities for permaculture learning may be limited.
7. Defining core competencies may help to identify basic skills that the permaculture community deems essential in practicing permaculture. (Competencies are knowledge and skills to be gained, and are to be distinguished from curricula.)
8. Many educators agree that there needs to be a revision and rethinking of the “core curriculum” to adapt to changing conditions and to balance the delivery of core content through lecture and presentations with skill-building and hands-on activities that cater to different learning styles.
9. Contact hours versus course length: PDC course lengths vary widely and so the actual “contact hours”, the time students are in contact with the lead instructor, varies widely. Originally, contact hours were meant to be 72 hours excluding design time, videos, and evening activities. At this point, educators marketing courses may be counting course hours very differently.
10. With so many educational opportunities and different learning formats, the “PDC” is only one of many potential learning opportunities. The idea that the PDC is necessary and the only pathway to permaculture education is erroneous.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The time is opportune to revise the concept of permaculture education and to acknowledge new forms beyond just the PDC. Part of this revision or reformation ;- ) includes new content and conditions that have emerged in the last 30 years, some of which form the foundation of an incipient permaculture education. As guides and mentors, we might begin by helping students define their learning goals. As educators, we might begin by defining our goals within a certain educational experience. As a network, at this point in our development, it would behoove us to articulate what content is essential to the core of a basic permaculture certificate. Once some kind of core content and curriculum is established, then other more advanced or applied modules may hive off from there with different kinds of certificates. An effort is underway, within our region, to define core competencies or skills that students may expect from a basic certificate course.

The PDC is due for a revision both in terms of content and how it is delivered. Permaculture education has naturally evolved beyond the PDC into more of an “educational ecosystem,” in which new elements and new pathways have emerged. Revised core content, pedagogical methods, and core competencies are among some of the new outcomes that students and educators should expect. “Educator guilds” may form to share curricula and establish basic educational guidelines. Rather than an external body regulating permaculture education and certification, we may choose an open and transparent “pledge” that articulates core content, core competencies, cultural values (like humility, inclusiveness and being of service) and pedagogical methods (like action learning, hands-on skill-building and participatory components). This will allow students to know what is being taught, so they can

make their own informed choices. Self-organizing educator guilds may provide opportunities for peer-review, professional development and the sharing of best practices on how to teach content and skills in dynamic ways. Our hope is to lift all boats, thus resulting in virtuous cycles of ever-improving permaculture education for all participants in a collegial and collaborative rather than a competitive fashion.

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