In Praise of The Weekend Design Course

Toby Hemenway and Jude Hobbs

The two-week Permaculture Design Course (PDC) is a life-changing experience: a fortnight of living with like-minded souls, the exhilaration of encountering a new way of looking at nearly everything, and that ready-to-change-the-world feeling at the course's end. It's a powerful process and one of the key elements in permaculture's transformative power. Not much, it seems, can match it.

But the two-week PDC is a challenging format for several reasons. It can be exhausting to teach and to take. The cost of room and board prices it out of reach of many low-income people. The time commitment means that people with full-time jobs-the majority of the population-must sacrifice their vacation to take it, which creates a permanent limit to the number of people the format can reach.

One alternative is the weekend PDC, in which the standard curriculum is presented over roughly six weekends. Michael Pilarski sums up some people's feeling toward it in his article, "Diversity in Permaculture Design Courses" (see PcA #51, pp.79-80), when he writes, "My experience and the general opinion is that weekend courses lack the power of residential courses." We used to agree with that sentiment.

For the past three years, we have taught weekend design courses in Eugene, Oregon. We have seen that these courses can match the power and impact of the residential PDC and present some advantages over the standard course. Participant evaluations from our weekend courses glow with the same phrases found in our two-week course reports: "changed my life," "most important course I've taken," "utterly transformative," and the like. We'd like to share what we've learned about making this course a success.

One problem is that the weekend PDC is often viewed and implemented as merely a stretched-out version of the residential course-a "PDC-lite:" the two-week course minus the shared meals, housing, and pressure-cooker intensity. This thinking is a design flaw that can lead to failure. The weekend PDC is a different creature altogether, full of opportunities to be explored.

A Local Community

The power of the two-week PDC lies in the community that it creates. A weekend PDC also can create a tremendous sense of community, and one that can be even more powerful and long-lasting.

Think about what happens after the residential course. When it ends, the glorious, but often short-lived, community dies, and participants scatter to the four winds. Sometimes, classmates remain in contact, but they often return to their homes to find that the bubble has burst-they are back in the real world with no kindred souls with whom to continue the experience. This is the "Permaculture Pit" (Permaculture Magazine 17:43). But when a weekend course ends, the participants return to homes that are often very near each other. Observing and building on the local nature of the weekend PDC-harvesting and using this regional resource-is the key to maximizing the course's potential.

How can we capitalize on the local nature of weekend courses? It's important to offer the weekend course to the correct population. A weekend course whose participants are spread across a major metropolitan area like Los Angeles or Chicago is too diffuse to retain local energy. They probably won't encounter each other again. We've been fortunate with Eugene as our base, with 130,000 residents who live within about ten miles of each other. At this scale, the participants can easily remain in contact after the course, yet there is a large enough population to fill a course once a year or more. Our first weekend course was offered to residents of a single neighborhood in Eugene, and we'd recommend marketing weekend courses similarly-to neighborhoods, clusters of small towns, or sections of a city from two to 15 miles across.

We taught our first weekend course in an upstairs room of a neighborhood food store. During breaks, we'd all troop down to buy snacks and drinks, or venture to the restaurant next door. In one hands-on project, we tidied up the store's street-side garden. Suddenly, the course was supporting the local community and being seen by the locals. When we picked up tools and marched en masse to garden at a nearby cooperative house, a neighbor called out to us, "I don't know where you're going, but I can see it involves gardening, and that's great!" All the course's projects were in one neighborhood-many at participants' houses, and they had a lasting impact on the community.

If building and supporting community is at the heart of the PDC's power, how can we maximize these effects in a weekend course? Here are some observations:

Though the intensity of personal relationships in a weekend course may be less than in the two-week format, friendships and trust can deepen over a longer time. Saturday morning check-ins allow each person to share the past week. We become enmeshed in each other's daily (real) lives, as we see and hear of a child's illness and recovery, the jitters and subsequent pride over an art opening, and other evolving personal stories. Participants often end up making more of an investment in each other because they know they'll see each other and the instructors again.

There is time during the week to digest the enormous volume of material. Two-week PDC students often complain of being overwhelmed and the lack of detail. But a weekend course allows outside reading, participant discussion groups and get-togethers outside class, and even homework that can deepen the grasp of the curriculum.

The right venue can support and be supported by the course. We've taught several courses at an emerging neighborhood retreat center with a large strawbale classroom. Design projects using a site like this one are more than just theoretical exercises. Many ideas from one course can be implemented by the next one. Our venue is evolving into a premier demonstration site, plus the owners and their neighbors are learning permaculture while they benefit from the projects. Not incidentally, implementation of projects can be traded for venue fees, reducing the cost of the course.

Design projects can benefit neighbors. We put the word out that we were looking for sites to design, and quickly had over ten responses from people within walking distance who wanted to sponsor the design project.

Participants can work on each other's sites during the week or in work parties after the course is over.

Long-term resources are available. Participants and instructors aren't limited to what they remembered to bring to the course; between sessions they can pick up books, tools, and other resources. Plus they can share resources and local knowledge with each other.

Local experts can teach during the course, and they often will stay connected with participants afterward, enhancing community networking.

Instructors and participants can share their libraries and other resources.

A post-course email list and get-togethers will strengthen the bond forged by the course. With over 75 participants living in Eugene, permaculture has achieved critical mass, and its influence is being felt all over the city. Neighborhoods made up of participants and their friends are coalescing into permaculture communities. In Eugene we have an existing permaculture guild that participants can easily hook into.

One major challenge is the potential for a personal crisis to occur over the six weekends, such as a family illness or job change, that may cause participants to drop out. Dropouts occasionally occur during the two-week course, too, but there can be a higher incidence of it during the two months or more of a weekend course.

Plenty of Positives

Many benefits are specific to the weekend course. One is the more relaxed atmosphere. The intensity of the two-week course provides part of its power, but it's not for everyone, and sometimes results in illnesses, emotional blow-ups, anxiety about the design project, and even short-term romances that aren't always easy to be around.

Another positive is the lower price. Without room and board, we can offer courses for as low as $300-400 per student. And local courses are eligible for grants that support community development and education. A grant from the City of Eugene allowed us to give the course to low-income people for only the cost of supplies, about $40.

Also, with so many former students nearby, word-of-mouth marketing (always the most powerful kind) can fill courses quickly. Work-trades are also easier to do, since participants are local.

We've been able to overcome some of the potential downsides to weekend courses with a little thought. The shared meals in a residential PDC are a big source of community-building, so we suggest pot-luck lunches or grabbing a large table in a nearby restaurant. Often, a weekend-only venue means we need to remove posters and projects from the site between classes. So we offer a work-trade for organizing the course and helping with course logistics: this person arrives early to set up the room, restoring that

homey feel provided by walls full of participant projects, colorful graphics, and useful information. We strongly recommend staying away from venues that reinforce the classroom feel of no windows, fluorescent lights, and rows of desks.

The two-week PDC is an outstanding format for presenting permaculture to activists and others who can devote a large block of time to the course. We remember ours as a major life experience. Permaculture won't reach a very large audience if learning it requires a two-week residency.

Until that great day when permaculture is offered in schools, we see the weekend PDC as an excellent format for making permaculture design available to people of all incomes and lifestyles, and potentially just as transformative as the residential PDC. The key is to remember that the weekend course acts locally, and done right, can build an enormous and active local permaculture community.

Toby Hemenway is associate editor of **Permaculture Activist** and author of **Gaia's Garden: A Guide to Home-Scale Permaculture**, (www.patternliteracy.com).

Jude Hobbs is a horticulturist, permaculture designer, and instructor. Her teaching techniques are based on developing curricula that encompass diverse learning styles. (www.cascadiapermaculture.com).