

A Learning Community as a Prototype for Working with Volunteers



In *PM119*, **Andrew Zionts Abrams**, **Joanna Crowson** and **Jorge Gallardo** wrote about creating regenerative communities as part of our focus on people care and regenerative cultures; this article takes an in-depth look at working with an ephemeral community that can transition to a distributed community

The seed of an idea

There's a permaculture principle we like that could be termed 'highest use' or 'highest value'. It was originally introduced to us during a PDC taught by permaculturist Penny Livingstone in 2008. This principle contemplates the highest value of an element and involves exploring the potential of any component in a permaculture design. Like many permaculture communities, we rely on the support of volunteers to move our project forward and, for a while now, we've been thinking about how to improve the exchange with volunteers who come to spend a period of time with us, looking at ways we can all experience the 'highest value' of the exchange, and how we can best express 'people care' in our permaculture practice with volunteers.

Volunteer magic

We first started receiving volunteers at Finca Catalina in 2015, from volunteering platforms and our local networks. We love hosting volunteers and believe the kind of ultra-local ephemeral regenerative community that is created can go on to have an impact out in the wider world as volunteers become part of our larger distributed community, building resilience across larger networks and geographies. From one-day permablitz events to months-long stays, we've experimented with a lot of different formats to try to find the best way to work together – both for the project and for those who so generously donate their time.

Early on in our work with volunteers we noticed a tension between the transactional nature of work in exchange for food and accommodation, and the much more magical kind of alchemy that can occur in a group if you can give it space. Trusting the process, understanding that the group is perfect with all its dynamics and imperfections, and having patience, combine to allow this alchemy to happen. This experience nurtured our dream of transforming the simple hosting of volunteers into a regenerative community which can manifest the highest value of the time we spend together, taking into account each person's gifts, and the learning and growth potential of the group. Like any permaculture design, our work with volunteers has involved an iterative design process of prototypes and revisions. As we began to imagine a regenerative community experience, we began to identify key learnings from hosting volunteers which we wanted to take into account. These include:

Onboarding: It's fundamental to have some kind of onboarding phase for volunteers, giving new arrivals a full introduction to everything they need to know so their time visiting the project is enjoyable and productive. As our project has evolved and become more complex, so has the onboarding. How to avoid this becoming onerous? Which parts can be provided

through written materials, signage, or videos? Which parts need to be more of a hands-on experience or 'job-shadowing'?

Length of stay: A short stay can involve too much investment of time and resources from our end for the amount of work that gets done. Just when someone has autonomy and has found a good work rhythm, it's time to leave. Yet a stay that is too long can leave the volunteer feeling undervalued, frustrated, and undercompensated. We've established that, in most cases, our sweet spot is between two and three months.

Creativity and autonomy: In addition to the daily tasks that need to be done at the project, like cooking, cleaning, watering and weeding, it's important for volunteers to have some projects of their own. A project that allows a volunteer to tap into their creativity, learn something new, and leave a lasting mark on our larger eco-social landscape creates a long-lasting connection and impact.

Shared purpose and objectives: We've found that the volunteers and the project itself must have a shared purpose for the experience to leave both parties feeling fulfilled. It's important that each volunteer or group we host is meeting a clear specific purpose of the project, and this also helps us to select individuals to ensure we meet our goals. Our focus on the people care aspect of permaculture means volunteers must also be willing to engage in and experience personal and collective growth.

Documentation and replicability: These are areas where we have tended to fall short in our work. We know that for the project's continuity, as well as the ability to share our work and learning, we need to incorporate this into everything we do, including our work with volunteers.

Finca Catalina is a land-based permaculture sanctuary located on 13 hectares of land on a hillside in the region of La Janda in southern Spain. A number of groups, volunteers and specialists have been working on the project since 2014, led by Andrew Zions Abrams. The work has involved restoring the functionality of the ecosystem by creating a zero-runoff water retention landscape, reforestation and experimenting with regenerative agriculture and care for the soil, working with sociocracy to strengthen our human community, and connecting to the community of life using tools from deep ecology. Almenara is our outreach project focused on using permaculture's triple ethic to explore beyond the idea of sustainability as sustaining a given situation over time (including what may be an impoverished and degraded landscape and/or community), instead coming together to imagine a regenerative future for all life.



The learning community framework

About a year ago during a volunteering stay, Gabi and Manu suggested creating a learning community at Finca Catalina. Their project Co.Estar works to support events and experiences focused on regenerative futures, and they presented a framework that would bring together people with similar goals related to learning and personal growth, with an emphasis on cooperative learning and sharing of knowledge, skills, and experiences. This learning community would take place within a supportive environment in which members encourage each other and provide mutual aid, and are actively engaged and involved in the learning process, contributing to discussions, projects and activities. The community would engage in reflective practices to continually improve learning and personal development, and participants would rely on each other's strengths and contributions, recognising that the community's success is tied to each individual's growth.

The overlap with our aims was obvious, and we decided to embark on a journey together, co-creating the ten-week 'Almenara Volunteer Learning Community' in spring of 2024. This was a rapid prototype since we only had three months from the seed of the idea until the start date. We decided to fund this first experience between us: our project would cover food, accommodation and materials, and the facilitators and participants would cover their own travel to and from the venue, receiving no financial compensation. Co.Estar would facilitate the process,

supported by the Almenara/Catalina team. This prototype would serve as the basis for future learning communities for both Co.Estar and Almenara/Catalina and could possibly be used as a reference to apply for funding for future editions.

We planned a series of actions, which were priorities for the project to complete during spring, closing the ten-week programme with our annual one-day festival – our open-door event that involves the participation of different regenerative initiatives from our area. The participants would help co-create and run this event, turning it into a sort of 'Grand Finale' for their time with us. In theory, the active volunteering time would occupy about five hours a day, five days a week, leaving plenty of free time for other personal work or leisure, and it would be composed of many threads, including:

- Tasks involved in daily living as a community, such as cooking, cleaning, feeding animals, composting, watering, etc.
- Work on projects that would be developed in smaller groups to address the needs of Finca Catalina, as well as personal projects.
- Documentation of the process, digitalising it and putting it into a format that could be shared through networks, etc.
- Involvement in community processes, meetings, sharing circles, feedback meetings, etc.
- Leisure activities, excursions and celebrations, and local community events.

Reviewing the process and design of our new pond



Co.Estar proposed working with a design and facilitation methodology called Novas Descobertas (New Discoveries), which had been developed by the Associação Novas Descobertas in Portugal. The result of years of observation of group creation processes and non-formal learning in summer camps and intensive residential courses in contact with nature, as well as the study and practice of various methodologies for collaboration and group learning, the proposal organises learning into a methodology with the following phases: DISCOVER, LEARN, DO and SHARE. The phases naturally flow into each other, are cyclical and have potential for fractal repetition. The New Discoveries Cycle inspired and guided the learning experience from the design of the programme structure and the planning of each session to the development of the steps to be taken within a specific dynamic. The overall programme reflected these four phases, but they were also present in each week's schedule, and to a certain degree, in the timetable for each day.

The experience

We hit the ground running. The participants came from diverse backgrounds, but most had previous knowledge of permaculture and were eager to deepen their practical experience. The group was held skilfully from the start and after a week together had established a feeling of community. Dedicated facilitators ensured that everyone felt taken care of, seen and included. This was the kind of people care we aspire to, and we could see its strength from the very beginning.

Time flew and we accomplished many of our goals, particularly in the areas of education, communication, people care and earth care. Our work was extensively documented, and a user-friendly web-based platform was created and filled with content from the project. We tripped and fell on occasion but made an honest effort to constantly incorporate feedback in order to learn from our mistakes and to improve future iterations. The one-day festival proved to be the perfect project for the culmination of the programme and a wonderful way for this ephemeral community to shine with all of its gifts. Here we share some key reflections that we plan to include in the design of our next learning community.

Reflections

Communication: Having two dedicated facilitators ensured that the group process was well held. There were many moments of connection for the volunteer group each day, starting with the morning circle and often ending after our community lunch with an exercise we called 'Flash Info'. The facilitators spent time each day planning the next day and adjusting the programme as needed. However, despite at least one Catalina resident participating in the morning circles, and more participating in the Flash Info sessions, it was impossible for residents to take part in all the daily update meetings and to be included in all the decision making. An attempt was made for weekly feedback meetings to cover this gap, but it wasn't always a smooth process. This created a communication gap between the two groups. We learned that there are two clients in this equation: Finca Catalina and its residents, and the learning community participants. Perhaps inevitably, while trying to bridge

that gap the facilitators tended to serve the interests of the programme, and at times the project's needs unintentionally took a back seat. To address this in the future we would ensure a Catalina resident is involved in all the daily meetings, dedicated to this communication.

Pre-planning vs. emergent design: We wanted the projects to emerge from the learning community to give the volunteers a sense of ownership and agency. However, Finca Catalina had pre-existing goals and needs. To complicate this further, the long hours dedicated to the Discover and Learn phases meant that by the time the programme's Do stage was reached, even the volunteers were anxious to be more actively doing. The fractal nature of the structure allowed us to include elements of each phase in each day and each week, but the larger, longer-term projects which were developed by smaller groups, ended up becoming pressed for time. Also, the plan for the first days of the programme included a practical team-building activity – creating a pond together. However, this task wasn't sufficiently well designed for efficient teamwork and dragged on a bit. Because it wasn't a project which had emerged from the learning community, it was excluded from the programme and became a burden for the Catalina residents rather than building group cohesion. In future editions, we aim to create structured, pre-designed projects which serve Catalina and can be started from the beginning of the programme with the whole group, bringing the volunteers together with the Catalina residents.

Structure versus flow: The Discover, Learn, Do and Share phases of the New Discoveries Cycle were programmed to each cover a certain number of weeks. While we adjusted the timeline to include emergent needs, we were generally quite loyal to the methodology for this pilot prototype. With hindsight we have identified the risk of the project serving the structure, rather than the structure serving the project. For future editions we will adapt the process to better meet the needs of the project from the beginning, as well as scheduling more time for organisation and planning with the facilitators before the volunteers arrive, and more time for feedback, closure and documentation at the end.

Deep ecology: We included some rituals and sessions focusing on deep ecology, but we plan to include deep ecology as a core, foundational thread in any future programme. We know that the transformation of our relationship to the more-than-human world is the key to imagining and co-creating a regenerative future, and therefore deep ecology practices shouldn't be relegated to complementary sessions.

Permaculture design: We were clear that we wanted to work with experienced permaculturists, and yet we neglected the opportunity to programme design sessions as a group, and to include more critical thinking around design. We will add moments for reviewing project designs, and create a space for critical thinking around design, to better tap into our collective intelligence around this core thread.

Time flies: While the idea was to limit work to 25 hours a week, this was an ambitious goal. First of all it's important to recognise that daily life also takes time, and not all the activities we do in daily life, such as cooking and cleaning,



Edible flowers on a spectacular cake

can realistically be included in these 25 hours. We also saw that when we added in extra activities like films or discussions, we tended not to compensate by making space elsewhere in the timetable. The result was a schedule that became overloaded, and left people feeling overwhelmed, or with a sense of 'FOMO' if they took time out.

The importance of continuity: Volunteers felt strongly that what they contributed to the project should be continued after they left. This gave a solid motivation for documentation and communication, so that future volunteers could continue where they left off. Link Tree, Google Drive and a web-platform where we could organise all the information really met this need. We were able to capture and document more of our process and learning than ever before. This information will serve for onboarding for future groups, and we will also build on it as a means to share our work beyond Catalina.

Unexpected gifts: Completely unexpected projects and learning emerged. One area was individuals sharing their skills or supporting in facilitation; food and food culture was another. Residents of Finca Catalina normally only eat lunch together Monday through Friday, as this is the main meal in Spain. With ten more mouths to feed, we put the onus on the learning community to prepare three meals a day and develop their own flow around this. A cookbook of recipes was created, and new systems and processes for sprouting, making yoghurt and sourdough bread flowed from the kitchen like never before.

Play: Sport, dance, games and playful dynamics proved to be a very important element of our time together. Play builds trust and a sense of camaraderie in ways that other activities can't.

Interaction between our local community and the ephemeral community: Though there were many opportunities for the volunteers to interact with and be involved in local events and activities, the learning community somehow became an isolated group within our larger group. In celebration this was largely remedied, but in daily workflow this was flagged up as an area for improvement.

Trust the process: Despite years of working with people we sometimes forget that there are many patterns which are common to all groups – voices of dissent and themes

of exclusion, injustice or overwhelm are all likely to appear. At the same time, the natural pattern of 'falling in love' as a group at the beginning or dividing into factions at another point are also likely to occur. Trusting the systemic nature of a group – that every member and everything that happens has something to teach and learn – can help bring us back to centre time and again.

The gift of an ephemeral regenerative community

Reflecting on our experience, we see that this Learning Community prototype really tapped into the gift economy beyond our expectations. The cultural shift that this model embodies is radical in the ways that it emphasises collective wealth, interdependence, empowerment and growth, and trust and reciprocity. In mainstream education and work, where the focus is on independence and personal interests, these aspects are all but absent.

This ephemeral community provided a living model for regenerative community, leaving seeds of hope in the hearts of the participants to be carried back into their own lives and work, and into what we have referred to in the past as our distributed community. We will continue to collaborate with many of the members of this group, helping us to build resilience across larger networks and geographies. Through the alchemy of community, we learn that the gifts of each person are amplified in the collective, that together we are more than the sum of our parts. Here, in the mutual recognition of our gifts, we find our true power and our capacity to transform the world.

A special thanks to our facilitators Gabriel Figueiró, Manuela Fonseca and Maria Guadalupe Mendonça, and to Jana, Kai, Marzia, Gabriel, Emma, Mark and Lianne for generously sharing their abundant gifts.

For more information check out the following websites:
www.almenara.online/en/home-en
www.coestar.com.br/en
<https://novasdescobertas.org>

More on volunteering:

'Creating Regenerative Communities' PM119

'The Gentle Art of Volunteering' PM113



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Joanna Crowson discovered her passion for permaculture in 1993 when she and her family bought land and started creating Casa Gaia in Cádiz. She currently works as a translator, educator and writer, focusing on creating regenerative cultures through reconnecting to the earth.

Jorge Gallardo, co-founder and coordinator of the cooperative Be.Time SCA, created in April 2017, works as a cultural mediator in a small town south of Cádiz, developing projects for the regeneration of species and landscapes and mobilising civil commitment in the protection of the commons.

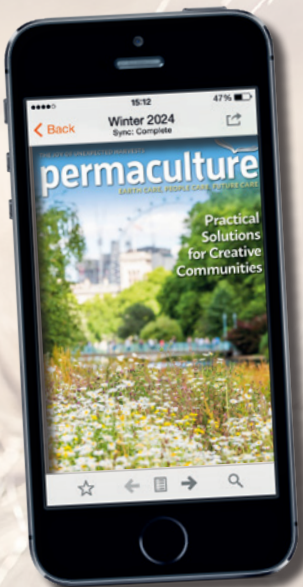
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PM121 published
July 2025



PM122 published
October 2024



PM123 published
January 2025

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