

# A WAY OF SEEING

## The Art of Teaching Creatively



Permaculture design teacher, Rob Hopkins, describes how teaching permaculture doesn't have to be all 'chalk and talk' but can be a creative, interactive experience.

Elly Van Veen

I've been teaching permaculture since 1997, but last summer I attended a workshop at Middlewood Centre for Environmental Excellence called 'Teaching Permaculture Creatively', which transformed my approach. Prior to the course I had a fairly standard 'chalk-and-talk' approach, with a few exercises, but still generally with me as the teacher and 'them' as the students. While this worked up to a point, I still felt that for the students it was hard to concentrate over a long period of time, and for some of them it seemed to remind them too much of school. School was a traumatic experience for many people, and anything you can do as a teacher to minimize that feeling, the better. For me as the teacher, being in the role of having to be 'The Font of All Wisdom' can be

very tiring and stressful and can add to a feeling of 'apartness' from the students.

The approach known as 'Teaching Permaculture Creatively' was developed by Skye and Robyn Clanfield and is set out in the manual of the same name. It gives a brilliant description of the ideas behind creative teaching, how people learn and how they retain information. They state that if we read information, we retain about 10% of what we have read. If we hear someone talking about it we retain about 20%. If we hear someone talking about something whilst visually demonstrating it, we retain around 50%. If we tell someone else about it, we can retain up to 80%. But the best way is if we tell someone else about it and show them, we can retain up to 90%.

This has profound implications for how we teach. It confirmed for me that for the students to sit and listen to me for two hours, however fascinating a lecture I may be presenting, isn't necessarily the best way for them to retain the bulk of the information. Also, people learn in very different ways. Some people are fine to sit and listen to talks, others need to do things. When teaching permaculture we should be striving to accommodate the full spectrum of ways in which people learn.

**Above:**  
Work  
beginning on  
the cob wall  
on top of  
rammed tyre  
foundations.

**Below:**  
Rob  
Hopkins.

### LIBERATED SNORING!

The course Rod Everett led at Middlewood took us through the whole approach and its applications. One of the things that really impressed me was at the beginning when Rod said "if you want to fall asleep during





**Above:**  
Students  
measuring  
contours.

a session please do". During the eight day course there was usually at least one person snoring in the corner of each session (myself included!) which I found very liberating!

On the second day, Rod took us for a leisurely walk around Middlewood. We walked and chatted and looked at the buildings, gardens and tree plantings and so on. It was all very relaxed and by the evening I was feeling rather cross. "Here I am paying to do this course and what have we done so far today? Nothing...". The next morning we began with a revision session (a very useful tool and something I do now on all my courses) and it was only then that it sank in

how much we had actually learnt on our walk. All the chatting and asking questions, the discussions and the opportunity to see, feel and smell things meant that we had actually accumulated a lot of information – how reed beds work, basic passive solar design and much more. We had been taught without realizing we were being taught, a great skill.

#### PUTTING THE THEORY INTO PRACTICE

Now, whenever I teach a permaculture course, I always begin by saying to the students, "What I would like you to take away from this course isn't vast mental lists of forest garden ground cover plants or thermal ratings for straw bale walls, but rather a way of seeing". Permaculture is like a pair of glasses you put on which allow you to see possibilities, that rubble-filled back yard as a food garden, your local community as a sustainable settlement, yourself as part of the hugely complex web of nature and the natural patterns which form the world around you. That moment when the penny drops and people start seeing in that way is one of the most rewarding things for me as a permaculture teacher.

Some of the exercises I do with students can be seen in the accompanying boxed panel. I always start every day with a revision session of the previous day, and once a month do a review of what has been done that month. The monthly review also gives an opportunity for feedback as to how people are doing with the course. I do revision sessions in

different ways; usually pairing people up to do a five minute each way Think and Listen (one person thinks out loud about everything they can remember while the other person listens, and then they swap over for the second five minutes). I find this a very useful technique. I also use guided visualizations sometimes, taking the students through the day, and sometimes run the guided visualization backwards like a rewinding film. I also get students in pairs to devise their own revision activity for the following day.

I use a lot of games – I find they are great for building group energy, for re-energizing people when they start to nod off, and because people seem to learn



better when they are enjoying themselves. Some of the games are very silly, some are more sensible, all of them are easy to learn and fun to play (good sources of games are *The Manual of Teaching Permaculture Creatively* and *Silver Bullets* by Karl Roenke). I also try and get the students to lead some of the sessions. So far we have had talks on low impact roundhouses, dowsing, and wine and beer making (where we made honey and apple mead which will be ready for the end of course party!).

In terms of timetables and preparing sessions, I have found *Permaculture Teachers' Guide* (edited by Andy Goldring) very useful. It gives an overview for a



**Centre right:**  
Making a  
living willow  
dome.

session on a particular subject, and you can then use that as a base to expand upon with your experience and research. Every teacher who teaches a permaculture design course, while covering all of the essentials, plays to their own strengths and interests. I also try to always have a camera with slide film in wherever I go; it's surprising the things that you see and think, "Oh, that's a good example of such and such...". Slides can be very effective teaching tools.

#### A PALETTE OF POSSIBILITIES

Last year I began a year long course, 'Permaculture – Designing for Sustainability', at the Kinsale Further Education Centre in Co. Cork, Ireland. It is the first time permaculture has been taught through the Adult Education system in Ireland. It has been a great success, the students are now beginning to discuss what they will do when the course is over, and have been coming up with some fascinating ideas. The grounds of the college have begun to be transformed, young trees getting established, the willow domes and tunnels breaking into leaf, clay plasters adorning the straw bale walls and the pond which was dug to obtain our cob building soil has filled and the puddle clay liner is holding well. There is already a lot of interest in the course for this September, and I am eager to see what the grounds will look like after another couple of years of this course. It is my hope now that many other colleges around Ireland pick up this course and run with it, and that through the mainstream education system we can be creating centres of environmental excellence all over the country. If the response to this one course is

anything to go by, the time seems to be right for it.

I love the palette of possibilities that permaculture gives people to paint with. A permaculture course gives people a chance to 'test-drive' a sustainable lifestyle, to immerse themselves in it for the duration of the course, to discover a practical vision of the change they have often felt the

need for but not quite been able to put their finger on. For me, the essence of teaching permaculture creatively is that it allows me to reach people in a way that a more conventional approach doesn't. People feel a sense of ownership of the course and are invited to

customize it to suit their interests. I get a lot from it as a teacher and I learn a lot from the students, all of who come to the course with a wide range of experience and skills



Rob Hopkins



*'Permaculture – Designing For Sustainability'* runs two days a week at the Kinsale Further Education Centre in Kinsale, Co. Cork starting in September 2002. Tel: +353 21 4772275 Email: [kinsalefurthered@eircom.net](mailto:kinsalefurthered@eircom.net) Web: [www.theholliesonline.com](http://www.theholliesonline.com)

**Above:**  
Forming cob into loaves.  
The soil was dug from the ground where the pond behind now stands.

#### FURTHER READING

*The Manual of Teaching Permaculture Creatively*; Skye and Robyn Clanfield; Earthcare Education, 1991. *Permaculture Teachers' Guide*; edited by Andy Goldring; WWF, Permaculture Association, Permanent Publications; £25.00+p&p<sup>†</sup> *Silver Bullets*; Karl Roenke; Kendall Hunt; £35.00+p&p<sup>†</sup>

<sup>†</sup> Available from *Permaculture Magazine's* Earth Repair Catalogue.

**Left:**  
Ramming gravel into tyre foundations.  
The stones on top are to create a key for the cob.

## GREAT GAMES

### RADISHES & LETTUCES

This is an extremely silly game, which is a great five minute exercise for just after lunch when eyelids are starting to droop. The rules are simple. The aim is to touch the knees of everyone else in the room, while at the same time trying to block everyone else from touching your knees. Whenever you succeed in touching someone else's knees you shout 'radishes!', and whenever you successfully block someone else from touching your knees you shout 'lettuces!'. The result is everyone dashing about maniacally shouting 'radishes!' and 'lettuces!', at the end of which they are all wide awake and ready for anything!

### URBAN TOUR GUIDES

The scenario for this game is that it is 30 years in the future. 30 years ago, a permaculture course (this one!) produced inspired individuals who set in motion a series of projects which led to this town/city being given a permaculture makeover. Now the place is a fully established model of permacultural excellence.

I take the group to a residential part of town and divide them into groups of 3-5 people. Each group has a special focus – water, food production, energy, community development, and any others you can come up with. They have 20-30 minutes to find a route to take the rest of the group on a 10 minute tour, pointing out the features of the development. Creativity, role-playing and behaving like real tour guides is encouraged!