



ACCREDITED PERMACULTURE TRAINING: A CRITIQUE

This article was a contribution to discussions between permaculture teachers about the then recently established Accredited Permaculture Training (APT) by Permaculture International Limited (PIL). This “industry training package” was developed by permaculture teachers and accredited by the Australian government, allowing students undergoing training to be eligible for government support. This system has continued to grow slowly as more established teachers become accredited. There has yet to be a radical revision of the system along the lines suggested in this article.



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This article outlines my understanding of APT as it currently exists and suggests how it might be improved to better reflect permaculture concepts and principles. A decade ago I participated in the debate within permaculture networks about the future of permaculture education. In an extended article *Permaculture Movement and Education: Searching For Ways Forward* (Article 14) I outlined my position which included doubts that formal accreditation of permaculture education and practise was a good idea. Many of the ideas in that article are still very relevant to the current discussions but by 2002 I was persuaded to support moves towards accreditation for the following reasons:

- The competency-based national training system which had been put in place since 1996 offered significant advantages over previous state-based systems of technical education and the University systems. The advantage of combining knowledge with practice fits well with PC's applied approach, compared to University's research approach.¹
- The work towards accreditation was gaining support from a broader range of experienced permaculture teachers suggesting the possibility of a more collective approach.
- PIL's initiative to accredit PC would prevent one of the state TAFE systems from "owning" accredited permaculture training. PIL's ownership would allow people who had dedicated their working lives to permaculture education to secure their livelihood.
- The apparent ability of Hortus Australia to sensitively steer the process. The fact that APT exists and is owned and controlled by the Permaculture International Limited (PIL), the most representative organization of the wider Australian permaculture network, is a credit to Robyn Francis, Guy Rischmueller (from Hortus Australia) and the team of experienced permaculture teachers from several states who put the package together.

I had some indirect input, mostly via Ian Lillington, but feel that my ideas were not expressed in the final package perhaps as a result of limited time and resources for the consultation process.

I have not done the COW and CALF training course which is necessary for experienced teachers to become accredited trainers based on their prior experience. However, I have attended workshops run on APT and discussed the issue with many of the best informed players and advocates as well as critics and sceptics of accredited training in general, as well as this particular package.

¹ Many concerns remained for me about disadvantages and problems with the national system, especially whether PC was big enough to be a part of this big system; and was CBT flexible enough to reflect permaculture as an agent for social change, or was it just workplace training that placed people in mainstream roles; and with rapidly emerging skills in the eclectic world of permaculture, is it ever possible to say that someone is competent in permaculture?

The fact that Robin Clayfield's work has been adapted to provide the basis of the CALF is a very positive sign of the APT process contributing to recognition of the influence of Robin's work on permaculture education. It is also the perfect antidote to the stultifying 'bureau-speak' of the COW necessary to satisfy the system gatekeepers that we are complying.

My perspective on APT doesn't come from close up study of all the documentation or detailed knowledge of the government systems but more a macro permaculture design view (from patterns rather than details).

The current package appears to be:

- too strongly centred on horticulture and is weaker in the many other streams or domains of permaculture design and action.
- most of the non horticultural units and competencies are loaded into the upper certificate levels (4 & 5)
- competencies involving physical work are mostly confined to the lower levels (1-3) while designing, managing and communicating are concentrated in the upper levels.

I accept that by this package being not so different from horticulture and other existing approved packages in basic structure, it has been accepted by the bureaucratic gate keepers but now that it exists we should use the requirement for regular reviews and changes to make it better reflect the best in permaculture education.

Without some very substantial changes there is a risk that APT will, over time, lose a lot of the best qualities in permaculture education. It will still be possible for permaculture teachers to run non-accredited PDCs unconstrained by this framework but subsidies and formal recognition of APT will be powerful economic forces leading to the displacement of these courses from the market place in all but the most exceptional cases.

Whether there is the will, resources and leeway to modify the package to the extent I believe is necessary remains to be seen.

Of course, APT is not a permaculture curriculum, something which people are slow to grasp, but a fact which I think is an advantage. Existing teachers can use their own established methods, local context and resources to teach in whatever way they see fit, but their students will be assessed by a common set of standards for each competency. Past attempts by educational institutions to writing curriculum materials which literally teach competencies step by step were mostly disastrous failures which we should avoid at all costs in implementing APT. While assessment of student competencies will inevitably lead to evaluation of the success of different teachers, their methods and formats in an organic way, the idea inherited from the original PDC concept that we must have a universal curriculum is at best unnecessary and potentially disastrous when linked to APT.

This shift from the unassessed participation of the PDC to the competency framework of APT results in rigid codification of competency, ignoring bioregional and cultural context. For APT we need to accept the reality that if a person can show competency then it doesn't matter what material or method the teacher/facilitator used to help them get there. On the other hand it is important that assessors are bioregionally and culturally literate of the context within which students are working so that we do not perpetuate the trap in mainstream culture and education that there are universal solutions which can be equally applied everywhere [the 'monoculture of mind'].

Another issue is that the framework may work well to transform and adapt current PDC education into Cert 4 in APT, but that over time if the system is successful, there will be increasing demand for Cert 1-3 in schools, for WWOOFers etc. In fact I see the potential opportunities for permaculture training as basic life skills education as massive. If energy peak precipitates even half its potential effects we may see a scramble by governments and community organisations to implement self reliance training. APT is the perfect vehicle for this process. Once the primary and critical task of accrediting currently established permaculture teachers is achieved, ensuring the lower levels of the package effectively feed into the higher levels will be the next task.

In the current package it is possible to see the stepping stones from how to plant a tree to how to design an agroforestry system but it is not so clear that the steps which lead to building design or community design are present at all.

I suggest the following framework could address these issues:

Decide on a set of streams or domains which cover the whole gamut of permaculture action and solutions. This is not easy because permaculture has progressively evolved from a primarily land-based design system towards whole of society redesign. One option would be to use the seven domains of the permaculture flower² as streams within which competencies would be placed.

A simpler and less radical change from the current structure would be three broader domains:

- Nature (from the garden to the wilderness)
- Built environment and technology
- People and community (including invisible structures)

It would then be possible to work backwards from some complex competencies like designing a building or even a community to the lower levels. Some illustrative examples could be:

Cert 1 units in built environment might be concerned with very basic understanding and abilities in day to day management of buildings for seasonal comfort, opening and closing blinds, windows etc, how to use a wood heater etc.

² Land & Nature Stewardship, Buildings, Tools and Technology, Culture & Education, Health & Spiritual Wellbeing, Finance and Economics, Land Tenure & Community Governance. See 'The Permaculture Flower' in Article 36

Cert 2 could include basic energy auditing useful in identifying a rental house which is likely to be relatively comfortable and low cost to heat, or very basic retrofitting of plumbing for rain or grey water harvesting.

Cert 1 in community might require demonstration of basic competence in being a functional member of a household able to come to decisions about cleaning, food prep and purchase etc. or participation in some voluntary cooperative group process outside of institutional constraints.

These examples illustrate how permaculture at the lower levels is an integrated and sustainable approach to practical life skills in a way that many people may have taken for granted 50 years ago. Permaculture as common sense (which is no longer common) or how to effectively recreate the “jack of all trades”

I believe the framework for APT needs to define a set of activities or generic ‘types of competencies’ such as:

- physical action,
- observation,
- communication,
- design and planning

which should be involved to varying degrees in all units at all 5 levels. This would guard against the default assumption in the current package that levels 1-3 are about getting your hands dirty while levels 4-5 involve the “gift of the gab” and nice plans.

Permies, even at Cert 1, need to be innovators, problem solvers and thinkers even if the subjects and issues which they need to be able to tackle are relatively simple.

For example, a Cert 2 Nature unit might expect a student to be able to read a layout plan for a shelterbelt and plant provided trees in prepared ground accordingly. But if the ground includes a few rock outcrops or there is an imbalance in numbers of tree stock provided, then a modicum of design thinking might be required to adapt the design to the circumstances.

On the other hand a person with a degree in forestry, invited to contribute to a reforestation design unit in Cert 4 or 5, should be quizzed about their practical experience in what they are designing.

This raises the tricky issue of to what degree it is possible to have a firewall between private behaviour and permaculture training. While I don’t believe it is appropriate to assess personal behaviour, the use of appropriate personal behaviour unrelated to any job or other public role in society to support a claim of competency should be encouraged. (For example, growing and eating from a home garden over a number of years.)

And, conversely, someone with no experience of community living should have difficulty seeking qualification in eco-village design compared with someone who lives in one. Permaculture is not a profession at arms length from the rest of our lives, so APT should reflect that, while avoiding the need to openly challenge the job training foundation stones of nationally accredited training. We don't want to bring in the bureaucratic hounds who could decide that this is all beyond the pail.

This more wholistic approach to assessment seem to fit in well with Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and recent discussions with some of the key players suggest that the process to RTO existing experienced permaculture teachers has reflected this. However most of those assessed so far are clearly well qualified. The status of personal activities in assessment will become more significant in more marginal cases.

Of greater concern is the possibility that students could pass through the whole APT system gaining competencies that they don't practice or only do so in a workplace context. The idea of being competent in permaculture only when paid to do so is problematic. Secondly once there is a whole system of formal courses available at all levels, will getting RPLed get more difficult relative to those who go through courses by well established teachers. It could be argued that this structural discounting of informal experiential learning has been built into permaculture education by the history of only recognising PDC graduates as "real permies". APT has the potential to give great recognition to experiential learning but only if we make sure that is built in and passed on through the assessment processes.

I have not even attempted to see how the current package could be adapted to take account of the framework suggested but present it as a design concept stimulated by the existing package and discussion with many permaculture colleagues with more experience of training systems than I have.

I want to acknowledge the central role of Hortus Australia as the Registered Training Organisation, and particularly Guy Rischmueller in getting APT up and running and the reasonable expectation that the entrepreneurial risk taken might eventually make a return for Hortus. From my limited observation I have been impressed by the way Guy uses his understanding of the "system" to interpret the rules to accommodate the needs of permaculture education. It would be difficult for someone less credentialed in the system to do so.

However, I think it is imperative that over time the monopoly role of Hortus as the RTO is re-evaluated once APT and PIL are on a stronger footing. In the meantime we should be prepared to take risks in quietly but deliberately bending the rules further to our collective ends rather than falling into fatalistic acceptance of APT's current form is the best that can be managed. We should remember our radical social change agenda and use the system as a tool rather than being a tool of the system.

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