What if We Learnt Like a Garden?

Learning Collective Agency through Permaculture

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The article is peer-reviewed and part of the Special Issue of SITE: Future-oriented pedagogies in practice: Innovation and agency

Published April 2026

Abstract

This short article invites readers to glimpse an ongoing learning experiment through which we prototype a future-oriented pedagogy aimed at cultivating resilient forms of collective agency and innovation. The pedagogy draws on permaculture, a regenerative design framework focused on maximizing beneficial relationships in nature, and is enacted in Permahaven, a living lab where we cultivate not only herbs and compost, but also regenerative thinking, collective agency, and a pedagogy grounded in joy and relationality. Permahaven provides an illustrative case of how permaculture principles can inform the design of learning environments that privilege collective over individualistic orientations and joy over instrumentalism. Such an approach strengthens learners' collective agency as well as their ability to co-create more resilient socio-ecological futures.

Open any newspaper today, browse through the latest headlines, and you will immediately be struck by the looming shadow of an increasingly complex, interconnected world that is driven by technological advancements and fraught by multiple crises.

But WHAT IF…

… we did not learn in square, concrete buildings that disconnect us from the world, but in nature and under the open sky?

... we prioritised interdependence over independence so that our students did not thrive to be the best in their class but to excel at collaboration?

...we designed joyful, regenerative learning spaces instead of draining ones?

WHAT IF all that was not a *what if* but a lived reality?

Imagine yourself standing outside – breathing in the fresh air, feeling sunrays slowly warming up your skin… for a moment, everything is still. Then you notice a soft, almost imperceptible humming sound – what could it be? You pause, take a relaxed breath and feel yourself arrive fully in the present moment. You look around. Herbs, berries, and wildflowers grow in gentle disorder, each finding its own place in the vibrant natural tapestry – Welcome to Permahaven, a living lab where we cultivate not just herbs and compost, but also collective agency, regenerative thinking, and a pedagogy rooted in joy and relationality.

Narratives and practices in entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial education have evolved significantly in recent years, and in particular the trope of the lone, 'heroic' entrepreneur is increasingly being questioned as scholarship highlights the importance of collective agency in entrepreneurial endeavours (Cairns et al., 2024; Doh et al., 2019). Indeed, the idea of "entrepreneurship as collective action" has been hailed as "the next frontier of entrepreneurship research" (Ben-Hafaïedh et al., 2024, p. 4).

Yet teaching collective agency is not straightforward in higher education systems that are mostly geared towards promoting individual performance, and where maximising autonomy and self-direction are usually presumed to be key learning goals (e.g. Deci & Ryan, 1985; Knowles, 1968; Mezirow, 1991; Rogers, 1975; Zimmerman, 2002). In response, a substantial body of educational thought now instead foregrounds collective and collaborative learning and agency, conceptualizing learning as participation in shared activity and positioning knowledge as co-constructed through interaction in communities of practice rather than as acquired in isolation (Freire, 1994; Lave & Wenger, 2001; Yang, 2023). However, such approaches tend to focus on human interaction, neglecting the ecological, spatial, and material conditions and

relations under which *collective* learning unfolds (Dillenbourg, 1999; Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Sociomaterial and practice-based scholars have shown that learning is not only socially but also materially mediated, emerging from entanglements of humans, tools, infrastructures, and environments (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010; Orlikowski, 2007). More recent posthuman and more-than-human perspectives in education similarly argue that nonhuman entities – animals, plants, technologies, landscapes – participate in educational assemblages and co-configure what becomes possible for learners (Snaza & Weaver, 2015; Taylor, 2017).

A related gap concerns innovation. Future-oriented education literature highlights the importance of anticipatory competence and the ability to imagine alternative socio-ecological futures (e.g. Hicks, 2014; Miller, 2018). Yet we know comparatively little about how collective learning environments can be deliberately designed to help learners co-imagine and co-prototype fundamentally different futures, or how to cultivate the resilience needed to build and sustain them. Situated and collaborative learning approaches are frequently justified by claims that they foster creativity, adaptability and 21st-century competences, but they tend to leave the mechanisms of innovation – and how to ensure its long-term sustainability – largely implicit: learning is theorised as becoming a more competent participant in existing practices rather than as inventing qualitatively new ones (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Moreover, as Austin (2011) notes, transformative learning must engage the full spectrum of human development, factual understanding, behavioural skills, and emotional work. Thus, we posit that a cornerstone of learning for collective agency is that it should be *joyful*, which is also a precondition for the long-term resilience of the innovations that will hopefully emerge from it. This point is endorsed by entrepreneurship scholarship which shows that positive emotions such as happiness, satisfaction or a sense of meaningfulness and belonging play a vital role in the long-term persistence and sustainability of entrepreneurial behaviour - and connecting with others whose company one enjoys is an important part of that (Cardon et al., 2017; Onkila et al., 2024; Su et al., 2020). Exploring how future-oriented collective learning spaces can be designed to enable such joyful experiences remains a vital, but underexplored frontier, however.

In this article, we invite you to glimpse an ongoing learning experiment in which we are prototyping a pedagogy for the future designed to foster resilient collective agency. This pedagogy is based on permaculture, a regenerative design framework focused on maximising beneficial relationships in nature (Holmgren, 2002). It aims to develop students' appreciation of their interdependence – not only with one another but also with more-than-human entities, to enhance their ability to collaborate fruitfully and with enjoyment, and thereby to strengthen their resilience for the long haul. Its core ethics – *Earth care, People care, Fair share* – and toolbox of adaptable design principles invite educators to treat the classroom as an ecosystem in which learning emerges from practising new types of relationships, feedback loops, shared responsibilities and working towards tangible collective outcomes rather than from rigid, teacher-led transmission to learners working towards individual goals and performance evaluations. As

permaculture-inspired educators, the goal is not to control but to dance with and "celebrate complexity" (Meadows, 2001, p. 8). Each class is thus an improvisation: a balance between structure and emergence. Sometimes, this means leaving time for silence. Sometimes, it means harvesting kale together while talking about grandparents' ailments and planetary boundaries. And sometimes it means letting go of control and accepting that participants literally wander off and do their own thing. Here, learning is understood as dependent on, and resulting from, intertwined ecological, social, and emotional systems.

'Permahaven' – a lived learning reality of a pedagogy for the future

It is Tuesday afternoon. The sky is cloudy, the air tinged with greyness, but there is no rain. A group of students[1] is gathered in the garden, ready to tackle a range of tasks, so they quickly form themselves into teams. A spontaneous 'forager' group heads to the local supermarket in search of discarded wooden pallets; within two hours, they have found several and upcycled them into a stall for selling apples from the garden's trees. A weeding team cheerfully takes on the forest of horsetail sprouting in the raised beds. Another group begins organising and tidying the shed and the last group, which includes several Italians, plants garlic in the "pasta raised bed", where they plan to add basil and tomatoes next spring. As they leave the garden, Elena, one of the students, shares that she hadn't imagined such a simple task as planting a garlic could be so much fun...

This educational glimpse shares insights from the experiences at Permahaven, an urban permaculture garden on the grounds of Copenhagen Business School, which serves as a living lab where learning grows from compost bins, herbal teas, shared values, and conversations while digging. Here, students, researchers, and community members gather to explore sustainability not only through curricular content but in practice (Burns, 2025); learning emerges through collective exchanges and agency, and interconnections within the natural ecosystem as well as between humans and non-human become palpable, lived, and joyful.

These collective activities depend on *complementarities* – between people and between people and nature – a notion captured by the permaculture concept of the *guild*. It represents a design technique when groups of different species (plant, sometimes animal, or fungal) are intentionally placed together because they complement and mutually support each other's growth and resilience, mimicking the functional diversity of natural ecosystems. One plant might fix nitrogen, another provides shade or wind protection, another offers a sturdy stem for a climber, while others attract pollinators or predatory insects or form a groundcover that suppresses weeds and retains moisture (Holmgren, 2002). In the learning context, a guild approach means creating conditions in which every student can co-contribute – and co-discover – their own knowledge, strengths, skills, preferences, experiences, and worldviews. Here, innovation is not the product of a lone entrepreneurial genius, but of a diverse learning community that prototypes ways of organising, deciding, and working with shared resources:

Ahmed has a great sense of humour that keeps the group's spirits up even if he never touches a hammer; Tobias thrives in a 'right-hand' role rather than formal leadership; Aika loves thinking through how to solve tasks but prefers to leave the practical work to Hans.

This permaculture design approach strongly resonates with the social pedagogical concept of the 'common third' (Husen, 1996). This concept refers to an activity, project, or shared object of engagement that learners and educators orient themselves towards collectively – not as teacher instructing student, but as people doing something together, often something practical such as gardening, building, or making art. The learning relationship is mediated and partially equalised by this shared third, which becomes the site where participants bring their different experiences, skills, identities, and perspectives and negotiate them in their encounter with each other and with the activity itself. Crucially, learners are free to shape this encounter in their own ways:

Julie and Maya enjoy working together as they got to know each other over time and they often find themselves gravitating towards the same tasks. Others, like Marius, love to work on their own, to shut off from the buzz of everyday life for a couple of hours while gardening. And then there is Georgi, who is always floating around, cheerfully chipping in wherever he is needed. None of this is imposed by anyone but rather self-organises into an organic collaboration.

In Permahaven, such common third activities are often characterised by joy, humour and a relaxed sense of complicity, as learners supplement one another and co-discover both their own strengths and the areas where they must rely on others. Their palpable delight at what they can create together, whether it be a compost container constructed from reclaimed wood, or an apple stall built from upcycled pallets foraged from the local supermarket, is striking. These common third moments of intense togetherness often give rise to communitas: a spontaneous, affective sense of 'we-ness' in which the usual social hierarchies are temporarily suspended, and participants experience a sense of collective agency and possibility, transforming the learning space into a place where new social forms and relationships can emerge (Turner, 2012). Working intentionally with a common third can thus produce a powerful sense of communitas that becomes an effective space for cultivating collective agency.

It's a dark November afternoon and students have organised themselves into working teams: one group making herbal tea bags using dried dandelion, rosehip, horsetail from the garden and handmade fabric pouches, another crafting dried-flower decorations for an upcoming sustainability university conference, and a third shaping and painting clay vases. Laughter and the scent of herbs fill the air. No one assigns roles, yet everything comes together seamlessly. The group enters a state of shared flow where collaboration, creativity, and care emerge naturally. This is a vivid glimpse of the common third in action, sparking communitas through the tactile, relational, and collective process of doing something meaningful together while connecting with nature.

The common third does not have to be a garden. Any project where participants can bring their own skills, knowledge, experiences, and unique ways of being and collaborating can serve as a common third which learners and teachers co-create and care for, potentially producing a space for communitas to arise. This approach shifts the focus from individual performance and grading to shared inquiry, ideation, implementation, and co-responsibility. Moving beyond narrowly human-centred pedagogies entails embracing a more entangled understanding of learning, where meaning and agency arise through ongoing and unpredictable interactions between people, environments, and materials. Drawing on Grünbaum's (2025) extension of the communitas concept, we see communitas not only as socially constructed, but as emerging through the sociomaterial interaction of human and nonhuman elements, nature, tools, materials, locations, and even weather conditions. These co-constitutive forces are not merely a backdrop but active participants that shape and are shaped by the learning process. The layout of the space, the presence of a duck couple in the pond, the textures of materials underfoot, or the choreography of movement through the garden can all contribute to this emergent togetherness.

In this way, a permaculture-aligned pedagogy can enable learning for collective agency, offering a practice-based route beyond individualistic, teacher-centred approaches towards collaborative, joyful forms of innovation. As learners design beds, build compost containers, experiment with business models, forage or negotiate how to enact *Earth care, People care* and *Fair share*, conventional roles blur and soften, new forms of collaboration are tried out, and learners get to enact sides of themselves that may not surface in conventional learning spaces. They experience themselves as a learning community with shared goals rather than as isolated individuals competing for grades.

Permaculture projects concretise collective, joyful learning approaches by offering a lived common third through which communitas, collective learning, and innovative pedagogical forms can be rehearsed as a doable reality, rather than imagined as a distant utopian future. Core permaculture ethics continually integrate de-individualising elements into the learning space. Fair share foregrounds sharing and limits; People care emphasises community and mutual support; and Earth care centres other-than-human beings. In permaculture thinking "humans are seen as responsible ecosystem managers within, rather than separate from nature," and their ways of cohabiting with the multiplicity of human and nonhuman beings around them must be guided by an ethic of care and interdependence (Centemeri, 2019, p. 1).

Coming back to the beginning, we hope this glimpse into Permahaven has sparked new thoughts and ideas. Just as the "what if…?" question opens multiple possibilities for reimagining entrepreneurial learning spaces, Permahaven is just one among many examples of how a permaculture framework can architect learning environments that cultivate future-oriented agency: collective rather than individualistic, joyful rather than instrumental. We invite you to indulge in this freedom: imagine and design your own *Permahaven*, prototyping the entangled pedagogies our interconnected worlds demand.

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[1] The names of the students and other individuals are fictitious, but the stories are based on real events and on quotes collected by the project team.