# *Transforming Me to We: Growing Community in the Learning Garden*

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Received August 2022
Accepted for publication Sep. 2022
Published Dec. 2022

**Abstract**

In this paper the author describes how he developed holistic learning environments by employing a variety of community-building approaches. These include: employing mindfulness practices; self-paced, collaborative learning; small-group, cooperative learning; and resolving full-group problems which students themselves identified and participated in solving. These approaches helped promote social change, a shift from *me-centered* to *we-centered* classrooms, and nourished an atmosphere of caring. While community building mitigated some problems, it created others. In responding to them, the author utilized approaches described here that focused on deepening community consciousness. The paper concludes with a story of the author's visit to a school which for him embodied qualities of a true community.

**Keywords:** *holistic learning environments, cooperative learning , community, mindfulness, social change, student-centered learning*

At the beginning of his August 16, 2001, *dharma* talk at the University of Massachusetts, Thich Nhat Hanh invited educators present to come forward and sit around him. He then encouraged us to transform our classes into *sanghas*, communities of mutual support. By that time I'd been practicing in a Buddhist *sangha* for 12 years. Three years earlier I'd read Parker Palmer's words:

> "Community, or connectedness, is the principle behind good teaching, but different teachers with different gifts create community in surprisingly different ways" (Palmer, 1998, p. 115).

I was not able, however, to recognize *sangha* as a description for an algebra class. How could I have missed that for all these years I'd been engaged in a growing community?

After completing a graduate program in theoretical physics, I stood in front of my first high school math class with no idea that my job would be akin to that of a gardener who grew, not flowers, but community in the classroom. After 37 years of teaching, 14 years of retirement and 21 years of sharing mindfulness with students and educators, I appreciate the aptness of the metaphor. My classroom did become a community garden. It grew a community, and it was tended by that community. In this garden I planted seeds, cared for tender shoots, and everyone harvested fruit at the end of each season.

As Palmer suggests, each garden is different. Each teacher brings unique seeds to plant as well as different experiences and ideas about how to teach. Over the years of growing community, I employed some methods I found elsewhere, adapted others to address current situations, and developed some of my own.

I had no road map for a growing community. Sometimes my own learning experiences and the seeds I found to plant came in direct response to student needs. Other times I sensed deeper community would promote growth for us all.

Looking back over 51 years of teaching, my evolution as a gardener of communities, though profoundly marked by the unexpected, feels coherent at the base.

**Two Master Gardeners**

I walked into my first high school math classroom as a teacher in September 1970. I had no experience as a teacher-intern. I'd read no books on education nor taken any education courses. I had only my own experience as a public school student to draw on. I began teaching as I'd been taught. The following summer I took my first methods course for teachers. Greeting us the first day, Ron McKeen held up a book: "This is our textbook. We won't be using it." Down on the desk it went. Pulling out a newspaper, he read aloud an op-ed piece on the new amendment granting 18-year-olds the right to vote, then invited responses. It turned out to be typical Ron—using a think-piece on education, theory, or current events as a springboard for reflection and discussion.

Sometimes we students took the lead—we met in small groups to plan and offer lessons to the rest of our class. My group responded enthusiastically to a suggestion proposed by our music teacher that we instruct the class in the Orff method of spontaneous music-making. What an amazing scene—the class sitting on the floor in a large circle—creating new rhythms, joining in, and making subtle changes—community joy! From start to finish, the course was a joint venture of both teacher and students.

Neil Davidson, a friend of Ron's, taught one of our classes and invited us to visit his summer school math class for elementary school teachers. There I witnessed a class divided into groups of four. They'd been studying parallel lines and were now researching parallelograms. As I watched, each group excitedly discovered a method of investigation normally presented by textbooks or teachers. A whole new chemistry of learning! I was beginning to see teaching as an art with many forms.

**Planting**

During my first year of teaching at Woodrow Wilson, a public high school in Washington, DC, I heard stories about the general math classes. They were large and absenteeism was chronic. Some students who did come to class seemed to have little interest. During that year, I discovered Harold Jacobs' new book *Mathematics: A Human Endeavor* (Jacobs, 1970), a book written for just this kind of student. Readable, full of cartoons and engaging illustrations, Jacobs' book embedded basic math skills and interesting math problems in fascinating topics. The following year, with my principal's support, I created and taught Topics in Mathematics, a course for "terminal math students." Using *Human Endeavor*, a book these students understood, we began. I hadn't reckoned on the effects of absenteeism, however, and realized the course needed to be self-paced. This allowed students to work together with others studying the same material and get my support as well. Students discussed homework problems, helped each other, and called me in for consultations as needed. Absenteeism still occurred, but it had less impact on the momentum of learning. Returning students became more engaged with the material and more involved with each other, exchanging help. Classes hummed. Working together energized these students, and I felt at home in the role of facilitator. However, without access to other textbooks that students could readily learn from, ones which didn't require much additional explanation, I taught my other courses in the usual manner. After three years at Wilson, I continued using a didactic approach in teaching when I moved to Sidwell Friends, a nearby Quaker school.

**Cross-pollination**

At Sidwell Friends, an independent school with its share of competitive, high-achieving students, I taught in a traditional manner but continued looking for student-friendly textbooks. After a few years, as I walked by the open door of a math classroom, I observed several students at the back of the room totally unengaged with what was going on. Did they already know what was being explained? Did they not understand the explanation? Were they just bored? How much class time did my own students spend unengaged? I knew the small-group learning I'd once witnessed had the potential for keeping students involved. Trusting my intuition, I adopted this approach in several geometry classes the following year using Harold Jacobs' new book (Jacobs, 1974). Each day groups of three or four went over homework, worked together on special problems, and discussed questions I posed. Helping and being helped by peers seemed to enable students to connect and appreciate each other in new ways. I saw the hard edge of competition dissolve, replaced by the porous boundary of caring. This was invisible to most administration members who visited my class expecting to see a charismatic teacher imparting wisdom from the front of the room. My students did prove themselves well prepared at the end of each year and, with few exceptions, deeply appreciated the community form our

learning took. One student communicated this to me at a year's close:

> "I will cherish every day's fun conversation and banter, for I learned much, even when off topic. It was immensely enjoyable and by far my favorite class. The atmosphere was just the way it should be, an optimum learning environment" (Brady, 2021, p. 92).

Problems did come up. One had to do with the process of dividing students into groups at the beginning of each new unit. Initially, I used two guidelines: 1) each student would work with every other student at least once during the year and 2) each group would include one of the more able members of the class. My nontransparent approach led to complaints. Students naturally objected to what they perceived as my trying to keep them from working with friends. Crossing my fingers, I tried a new method—forming groups at random, a student drawing names out of a hat. These groups turned out to be effective. Students never again complained about group membership. I learned something of value from my students, and our experience of interdependence deepened.

**Cultivating and Watering**

It happened that I followed this profound shift in my understanding of the teacher's role with a personal change resulting from being introduced to mindfulness. Jon Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness in this way:

> "Mindfulness means intentionally paying attention to present-moment experience, inside ourselves, our minds and bodies, as well as in our environment, with an attitude of openness, curiosity, kindness and care" (Weare & Bethune, 2021, p. 16).

I was curious. I began reading books about mindfulness. I then attended a mindfulness retreat. On returning home, I helped start a mindfulness practice group with friends. My life began to slow down and I began to experience moments of mindfulness. Wanting to share this treasure with my geometry students, I received permission to begin each class with a five-minute mindfulness activity. At the beginning of the year, I gave each student a journal for responding to prompts one or two days each week and for nonstop free writing on Fridays. An assistant principal, observing my class, told me she'd never seen students working together with such focus and consideration. "What do you attribute that to?" I asked. "Clearly, the opening reflective practice," she replied. Certainly, students might arrive at my class with many things other than math on their minds. After five minutes of recording anything they wished on the back pages of their journals, the personal part I never looked at, they could be more available for small-group work.

On test and quiz days, we devoted five minutes at the beginning of class to meditation. I invited students to tune into their thoughts and feelings. No matter what they were, I encouraged students to accept them but also notice that, whatever else their present moment held, it also held memories of success and pride in mathematics. "Recall one of these successes and sit with it until you feel ready to begin working," I suggested. It was rare that a student didn't feel ready after five minutes, but in a few instances we all showed our support by waiting a little longer. One group of students carried this practice out of our classroom and met in the hall five minutes before an English exam to sit on the floor and meditate together.

Some days I asked students to write in the front of their journals, informing me about their experiences of the class, their current working group, a recent test, or material we were studying. Occasionally, before discussing them with their group, they wrote reflections on questions and problems I'd given them. I learned a great deal from reading these journal entries. Regardless of my internal response, I only expressed gratitude, writing "Thank you. RB." However, when students indicated their groups were having problems, I'd have a chat with the group. Indicating I was aware of some difficulties, I'd ask for a moment of silence for group members to contemplate what each might do individually to improve their group's experience.

**Weeding**

Student groups also had systemic problems. From the beginning, students complained about others who hadn't done the homework. These students contributed little to their groups beyond asking questions. I hoped naively that peer pressure would encourage them to develop more responsible homework habits. This did not happen. I considered counting homework as part of semester grades, but this autocratic approach lacked the spirit of community. Still seeking a solution when I attended a Creative Problem Solving Institute in Buffalo, I found the atmosphere of collegiality so alive in this week-long gathering of inventors, artists, educators, consultants, business people, and helping

professionals, that I felt drawn to ask for advice from others. A solution developed organically.

At CPSI I asked Bill Mitchell, a management trainer with IBM, about small-group responsibility. He suggested each small group designate a leader who checked to see that everyone had done the homework. I could choose group leaders or allow each group to select their own, then explicitly turn the leadership over to them. "After all," he said, "you can see this as a group problem rather than one between you and the group." I was intrigued by this fresh way of looking at the power dynamic.

In his plenary talk the next evening, creativity expert Oz Swallow told us, "You can't hold others responsible for their actions. You can only hold them accountable. Responsibility arises from within. It can't be taught. All you can do is create situations in which a person can choose to be responsible." The next day I noticed Oz in conversation with a woman I didn't know. I waited to see if he would entertain a question from me. Their chat ended, and the woman, Marcy, a management consultant, addressed me directly, inviting connection. "What's on your mind?" she asked. I outlined my problem, my initial idea, and Bill's advice.

"Don't count the homework," Marcy advised, "They're already doing worse on tests because they haven't done their homework thoroughly." Then, echoing Oz, she added, "You can't teach responsible behavior. It has to come from within."

Wondering how I could better support the small groups, I responded, "Maybe I should explain why groups are important and let students know that if they can't make a commitment to a group, they shouldn't be part of it."

"No," Marcy replied, "You want everyone to participate in a group. This key element of your course is just as true outside the classroom. Students need to learn how to support one another. The business model builds in accountability through a group leader because their bottom line is results. If, as part of a team, people grow and become more responsible, that's a plus."

This was all I needed to hear. It was what I'd come to CPSI for—a fresh kind of exchange that nourished me as a learner. The following fall I divided my math students into groups and introduced the homework process this way:

> "Occasionally, some of you won't have enough time to complete your homework. When you see this is likely, try to complete the reading and work on a variety of problems so you'll be able to participate fully in your group. If you're not able to do this, you'll be a drag on your group. Tell them you need to take some time in the Math Help Room to work on your own before joining them. We all understand that situations come up from time to time that get in the way of homework. This will only be a problem if it becomes a habit" (Brady, 2021, pp. 93-94).

Students arriving without homework no longer frustrated their group. However, there remained a more subtle problem: students who glossed over the reading in order to get to the assigned problems. Their partial understanding inhibited their ability to fully support their group. Eventually, I responded to this concern by giving students stickers that read "I learn for you" to put on their textbook covers as a reminder of their responsibility to their group and to the class as a whole. This idea came from a retreat I'd been on that summer. Thich Nhat Hanh had given each of us a sticker reading "I walk for you" to put in one of our shoes to remind us that our practice of walking meditation enriched and was enriched by that of others.

Some problems arose outside my classroom community. At Sidwell Friends I had a parent who complained that his daughter was doing poorly because I was offering insufficient instruction. Wanting to bring him into alignment with the community, I met regularly with his daughter outside of class until she and Dad both felt special support was no longer needed. At Woodrow Wilson where I first taught, at the close of my first year teaching "Topics in Mathematics," my principal informed me that the DC Central Office had advised him that my students couldn't receive credit for the course. "Topics in Mathematics" wasn't on their course roster. "Please ask them to add it," I responded. He did, and they did.

**Composting**

In the early 1990s, an afternoon ninth/tenth grade algebra class where I didn't employ small-group learning repeatedly had trouble settling down. These students completed far less work than those in my morning class. Accustomed to teaching motivated Sidwell students who valued success, I was confused. Because I was teaching both classes in the

same manner, I suspected the source of the difficulty rested with the students, most likely a group of immature ninth graders. However, Eldridge Cleaver's words rang in my ears: "If you are not a part of the solution, you are a part of the problem." I was clearly part of the problem. But how could I be part of the solution?

As an experienced teacher, I felt embarrassed about having difficulty conducting a class. I tried assigning seats. This had no apparent effect. Asking students to write homework solutions on the board didn't help. I was too self-conscious to ask for guidance from a colleague. Finally, in December, an opportunity for assistance in the form of a visiting educational consultant! To her question about whether I was sure the cause of the class disorder was my immature students, I admitted I was not. "Why don't you ask the class what the problem is?" she offered. Bingo! That hadn't occurred to me. Later, on an anonymous survey, many students identified being tired, unfocused, and lacking energy after lunch as the source of the problem. Reading their feedback, I felt sure we could all be part of a solution. The students had done their part in identifying the problem. I thanked them the following day and promised to do some investigation over winter break to see if I could come up with a remedy for tiredness.

During the break I met a meditation teacher who happened to be a yoga practitioner. He told me about *qi*, a Chinese word pronounced "chi." meaning life-force energy, and shared an exercise which brings *qi* up from the feet.

> "Stand on your toes with your hands over your head. Breathe out as you bend down and touch the floor. Then breathe in and slowly straighten, raising your hands back up over your head. Repeat this exercise nine more times, remaining on your toes" (Brady, 2021, p. 66).

This practice immediately energized me! I returned to school, gathered my after-lunch class in a circle, and told them I'd found a remedy for our problem. Giving a demonstration, I counted to ten, leading the class in the stretching exercise. Afterward, students reported feeling invigorated and ready to learn. From then on, with students leading, we began our class with this practice. Anyone could be excused from participating if he or she already felt wide awake. Few opted out. Our shared opening practice created a kind of kinship among us. We became more attentive to each other, more focused on learning, and a real community. Like a refreshing stream, memories of this experience murmured through my teaching life for years.

**Harvesting**

Recognizing and celebrating student growth and contribution was an important dimension of these classroom communities. In the algebra class, this took the form of inviting students to lead daily stretching. In geometry classes, at the conclusion of each unit before new groups formed, all students wrote thank you notes to each member of their old group. This quickly became an important class ritual. Another kind of recognition came about serendipitously as the end of one year approached. Throughout the year students had entrusted their reflections, observations, feelings, and insights to the back of their journals. How I wished I could read them! This desire led me to ask students to take an evening off from math assignments to read all the entries in the back of their journal, select one that seemed of particular importance, and then tell me about it in one page. This response brought tears to my eyes:

> "I have learned great things from myself in the way that I respond to quotes in my journal and in how I respond to myself in free writing. In writing continuously, I often write things that I did not understand consciously before they hit the paper" (Brady, 2007, p. 391).

What this student's presence contributed to his groups and to the class as a whole!

**Culmination—Growing Community among Educators**

One experience, in particular, demonstrates to me my development as a grower of community. Wanting to share the benefits I'd received from my personal mindfulness practice with fellow teachers, in 2000 I began co-leading weekend mindfulness workshops. Most participants responded positively, but for me it was a bit like introducing a foreign language for half a day, then sending students back to an environment where that language wasn't spoken. I'd found my own mindfulness practice deepened appreciably when I attended retreats. They provided me with total immersion in mindful living, supporting and being supported by others with the same aspiration—similar to living in another country to learn their language. Practicing regularly with a group of friends on the same wavelength helped me sustain and build on that deepening.

I retired from math teaching in 2007, wanting to devote all my energy to sharing mindfulness with educators. Their mindfulness practice could reach many more students than could mine alone. Appreciating the learning potential of longer retreats, I started co-leading five-day educator retreats. In 2013 I was invited to lead an eight-day retreat for Italian teachers at Centro Avalokita, a small retreat center near Castelli, Italy, and there, two years later, I encountered my preeminent experience in growing community.

In retreats I participated in and led, helping participants develop and deepen their mindful awareness was the principal desired outcome. During retreats for educators, participants pay mindful attention to many things including their breathing, walking, eating, and, in my retreats, their speaking and listening. But because most educators lead busy lives, they arrive at retreats with busy minds that may find the mindful attention described above by Kabat-Zinn very challenging. Silence offers them support. In some mindfulness retreats participants maintain silence for the duration. Others designate the times of practice and other parts of the day as silent. Silence is maintained at Avalokita retreats during sitting and walking meditation, meals, and morning work period. For my 2013 retreat it also extended from the end of evening activities through breakfast. These times without talking gave all of us greater opportunity to connect with ourselves and others from stillness.

I returned to Avalokita to teach two years later. I had many ideas. Buoyed by my experience of the previous retreat and the collective energy of the staff, I requested evening silence be extended through the end of lunch the following day. From the start, participants balked at that amount of silence. Conversations occurred during outdoor walking meditation. A small group of participants, returning to Avalokita from a walk at 10:00 p.m., finished their conversation outside my window. Complaints about the amount of prescribed silence were aired during sharing groups.

My initial reaction to all this was upset. Silence felt fundamental to me. I had no idea how to proceed. Knowing I needed advice, I asked senior staff members for suggestions. They told me to relax, to accept things as they were. "Italians love to talk, teachers most of all." Were they sure? Was it only a matter of Italian teachers loving to talk? Suddenly I saw this as a learning opportunity for every one of us. Why was silence breaking down? This time, I knew I needed to ask the students, to invite them to be part of discovering a solution of this problem I had yet to understand. The next day, feeling vulnerable, the eyes of many students on me, I asked for written feedback. All participants and staff members replied anonymously to two questions:

> -Do you engage in conversations during quiet time?
> -If so, for what reasons?

When I read their responses later, most indicated engaging in conversations with other teachers here, whom they found to be special, quite unlike those back home. Our schedule didn't provide enough time to talk with these wonderful new friends. There were also some who had observed the prescribed silence. With the retreat concluding in two days, I realized that, as beneficial as silence might be, community harmony was a higher goal. Could I come up with a solution which might satisfy everyone? There were no educational consultants here to give me advice. My hosts had already suggested I drop the issue, but this wasn't an option I was comfortable with. In any case, it was too late. Having no idea how to resolve the situation, I saw only one place to turn—to the group. I'd ask the community to resolve the issue by consensus. As a faculty member, I'd experienced consensus as one way of addressing concerns at my Quaker school. It could be a lengthy process. I asked Stefano, the resident teacher, to schedule two hours for my next day's talk.

The following day I began by reporting results of the survey to the group. Telling them I didn't have a solution and needed their help, I turned the problem over to them. I asked everyone in the circle to listen deeply. Each person would have a chance to share his or her own thoughts and feelings. I felt confident a resolution meeting everyone's needs would emerge. Out of the quiet, everyone shared. For one retreatant, silence had ceased to be a restriction and had become a refuge. Another appreciated the value silence had for others and recommended designating a place for meeting and talking outside the building. This proposal was endorsed by many others until it was pointed out that this solution would divide the group, as smoking and nonsmoking teachers' lounges had once divided faculty at Italian schools. Finally, everyone endorsed a proposal to end silence after breakfast the following (final) day of the retreat. We ended our almost two-hour meeting with a sense of deep connection and gratitude.

I returned the following summer to teach at Avalokita for a third time. This time I asked that evening silent hours not be announced. At the close of the opening evening orientation, I let everyone know that *rest* would be the next day's

theme—rest for our minds as well as our bodies. "We'll rest our minds by observing silence through the end of lunch. Then we'll treat our bodies to a period of total relaxation practice." The collective sigh of relief from beleaguered schoolteachers was audible. After a moment, I concluded, "Following that we'll decide as a group how much silence we want to have for the remainder of the retreat."

We all met the next afternoon to search for consensus about silence—should silence extend through lunch or end earlier? The sixteen retreatants included five entirely new to mindfulness practice. Many had concerns—one woman knew no one at the retreat and needed to connect with others. One was sure that even staying silent through breakfast would be a stretch. A third needed to call her children every morning. On the other hand, one new practitioner found this such a rare opportunity to explore quiet that she didn't want to miss it. Long-time meditators chimed in. Silence began to take on a living quality. When it came, the group's agreement to observe silence through lunch each day was resounding. Necessary conversations could take place outside our building. Although not everyone observed the decision thoroughly, the power of the group process set in motion a strong retreat with a profound sense of community.

**Conclusion**

Growing a community in the learning garden has been, for me, a noble and complex undertaking. True community is not supported by the "I, me, my" culture in which we live, nor, most likely, by the educational institutions where we work. I conclude with a story about visiting one school that impressed me as being a genuine community.

In my experience schools have been places where students have been required to be responsible for their work and for their behavior. For most, that was about it. I encountered one exception in my explorations—Somerset School, a small alternative, independent high school in Northwest Washington, DC. I'd heard from friends who knew it that Somerset was a different kind of school and arranged a visit on one of my professional days. Their math classes looked very much like my own, students came together to work in groups and pairs as the need arose, support was given by teachers as well as occasional explanation of new material.

As luck would have it, one of the regular meetings of all members of the school community occurred that day following classes. After students and faculty had settled into a large classroom, a senior began chairing the meeting by going over the agenda. As topics were introduced, hands were raised and a student recorded the names of those who wished to speak. All went smoothly until someone noticed that three students who'd been at school that day weren't present in the meeting. Another student volunteered to find them. He located the missing students in a nearby classroom and escorted them to the meeting. When an explanation for their absence was requested, a spokesperson for the group rose and addressed the community:

> Those of you whose parents pay for you to attend Somerset may take it for granted that everyone has the time to attend this meeting. But the three of us have been working on math together because we need to complete it before going home. We have jobs to go to. We need to earn money to be able to attend this school."
>
> There was silence. I was awestruck. The students had asked their community to understand community at a very deep level. They got up and left the room to resume their work (Brady, 2021, p. 66-67).

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**Author Acknowledgement**

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