

# **THE WE-RO'S JOURNEY AND THE ART OF HOLDING SPACE: CREATING CONDITIONS FOR COLLABORATIVE LEARNING FORESTS**

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## **Abstract**

This paper discusses core qualities and principles of holding nurturing space in academic learning contexts, such as courses, conferences, and retreats. It draws on the author's transdisciplinary framework for designing collaborative learning experiences as living systems in ways that foster conditions for autopoietic developments in the group—developments that give rise to new collective insights. The paper deepens this inquiry by introducing fourteen qualities of holding group space. It offers definitions, examples, and implementation strategies, and highlights self-reflection considerations for facilitators. While initially conceived for academic settings, the guidelines developed here apply to any context of holding space for groups or events.

The author then describes two recent learning contexts where a variety of space-holding strategies were utilized and where clear signs of collective wisdom emerged. The two learning experiences featured include a hybrid in-person and online master's program in leadership studies, and a distance education asynchronous community college course in human values, both offered by learning institutions in Northern California. These courses drew on ecological principles and metaphors of nature to help facilitate a felt experience of belonging to an interdependent *learning forest*. The asynchronous online course featured a new module called *The WeRo's Journey* where learners were encouraged to harvest collective insights arising in the group (The *WeRo*).

During this divisive time, the author invites the readers to consider their own unique style of holding space and to experiment with new ways of supporting collaborative learning. The qualities of holding space introduced here are intended to encourage facilitators to co-create conditions for healing, peace, and creative solutions for a troubled planet.

## **Keywords**

Collaborative learning, collective wisdom, autopoietic developments, living systems awareness, systems literacy

## **1 | Introduction**

During a time of heightened polarization, the world needs spaces where people feel welcome to connect across differences, to listen for the wisdom in the group, and to tap into a wellspring of collective insight.

This paper discusses core qualities and principles of holding nurturing space in academic learning settings, such as courses, conferences, or retreats. Based on my academic research and teaching experience integrating living systems theory and transformative learning theory and related schools of thought (Widhalm 2011a, 2011b, 2016), I explore strategies for facilitating environments where students feel supported on their learning journey and where the learning experience gives rise to emergent insight—new ideas and developments that no individual learner would have come up with on their own.

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The application of this approach goes beyond academic settings, however. Any learning environment or gathering centered around a shared purpose may benefit from the ideas outlined below.

I will first offer my definition for holding space. I will then introduce a series of space-holding qualities and considerations, including core criteria for autopoietic developments in groups. In addition, I will share self-reflection prompts for facilitators of collaborative environments. Finally, I will expand on these space-holding qualities and criteria in the context of two courses at St. Mary's College of California and Merritt College in Oakland, California that I facilitated recently. My immersion in these two experiences allowed me to revise and deepen my theoretical approach to holding space.

As an instructor in the Master of Leadership Studies program at St. Mary's College of California, I recently had the opportunity to accompany a cohort through its academic journey. In my role as their *weaver* (a coordinator and advisor function who supports learners throughout their course of study), I was able to witness this group overcome unexpected hurdles and blossom into an empowered, self-organizing and joyful learning community. After the cohort graduated, several senior faculty members expressed appreciation for how I held space for the group during a time when the college experienced multiple transitions. I then began to ponder what my *special sauce* in holding space entailed.

Parallely, I initiated a major revision of my distance education Human Values course at Merritt College, an urban community college in Oakland, California. Among other adaptations, I introduced a new module that I named *The We-Ro's Journey*. The term We-Ro's Journey is derived from the concept of the hero's journey. It metaphorically elevates this journey to a collective level. I designed this module for the purpose of harvesting shared insights in the group. My evaluator during this semester experienced the online environment as particularly active and collaborative, given the limitations of an *asynchronous* online space format where learners access course materials and participate on their own schedule. Once again, I began to ponder what contributed to the online environment feeling so vibrant, safe, and inviting.

It is my hope that this paper will help spark dialog on this topic. I am curious to learn about the readers' experiences of holding space in a variety of learning contexts.

### 2. | The Art of Holding Space- What Does Holding Space Mean in an Academic Setting?

Our relationship lives in the space between us. It doesn't live in me or in you or even in the dialogue between the two us – it lives in the space we live together and that space is sacred space.

—Martin Buber, *I and Thou*

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and right-doing there is a field – I will meet you there.

—Rumi

The term *holding space* is an idiom of the English language that does not easily translate into other languages, including my own mother tongue (German). Let me offer my take on what holding space means in academic learning settings: In the context of learning communities, I refer to *space* as an environment (physical or virtual) sheltered to support the learning process. This includes a temporal boundary (beginning and end time of the course), and a spatial boundary (such as an online learning management system or physical classroom). The same considerations apply to a conference, festival, or

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any other context where one or more facilitators are intentionally tending to the experience of participants. Within the overarching spatial and temporal boundary, there are smaller niches and sub-spaces that further facilitate learning in many possible constellations for reflection with self and others. Likewise, the learning space, via its semi-permeable boundary, continuously influences and is influenced by its outside environment.

My definition of *space* is very similar to the three conditions for *autopoiesis* in a living system, as described by Capra (1996) and originally coined by Maturana and Varela (1991). Capra defines the following properties of an autopoietic network.

- self-bounded: The boundary is an integral part of the network. The system is organizationally closed but open regarding flow of energy and matter.
- self-generating, self-renewing, and self-perpetuating: All components are continually produced and replaced by transformation processes within the network.
- structural coupling: New structures are created through interaction with the environment, which results in continual adaptation, learning, and development.

These three conditions—bounded, self-generating, and structural coupling—give rise to autopoietic developments, where the system takes on new qualities that were not there before and that may be more adaptive to new circumstances.

In my dissertation, I introduced a framework of designing learning communities as living systems where content, process, and structure synergistically reinforce each other and mimic the principles of living systems (Widhalm, 2011a). In this paper, I offer additional design considerations and metaphoric frames that, I hope, will help readers recognize their own unique skillsets in holding space.

Holding space is a concept utilized in the healing arts (Orloff, 2024), in facilitation (brown, 2017), parenting, and other contexts of tending to relational spaces. According to Orloff, “holding space is a loving-kindness practice that you can use when you are supporting others. It’s more about ‘being’ than ‘doing.’ Your energy and attitude can make all the difference” (p.15).

During this time of great divisiveness, I have become even more dedicated to better understanding the healing properties of holding space so that I may be of service to our aching world full of healing potential.

### 3. | Qualities of Holding Space

Below I introduce a series of qualities of holding space that I have distilled from my research and teaching practice. Many of these qualities overlap. They are intended to offer a flavor of how multi-nuanced the process of holding space can be in academic settings.

#### 3. 1. | Physical and Virtual Space

Here I am referring to the logistics commonly associated with preparing the learning space. These include

- room setup including chairs, tables, pillows, blankets, floor and wall space
- virtual space setup
- lighting and the role of daylight
- decorations, music and other considerations to enhance ambiance
- technology setup
- rules for technology use by participants
- utilization of outdoor space and the natural environment

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- logistics and items for welcoming participants, such as a welcome folder, pens, notebooks, goodie bags, snacks, and drinks
- a welcome and signup process or table

### 2.2. | Flow Space

Here I am referring to space as a dynamic environment with permeable boundaries, capable of adapting to feedback and attuning to the physiological needs and rhythms of learners. This includes

- being somewhat flexible about pauses, breaks, and agenda items as appropriate
- paying attention to the flow between structured and semi-structured times and between formal assignments and informal time
- shifting between various group sizes and individual reflection

There is now a growing body of literature on designing meeting and learning spaces as living systems, introducing a variety of ways of tending to *flow space*. (Liberating Structures, n.d.; The Art of Hosting, n.d.; The Work that Reconnects, n.d.).

### 2.3. | Heart Space

Here I am referring to the capacity to nurture a caring, warm, and welcoming atmosphere. *Heart space* invites learners to attune to, tend to, and feel nourished by a reverent relationship with themselves, each other, and all of life.

In biocentric education (Calvacante, et al., 2017), there is a rich body of theory and practices under the umbrella term *affective intelligence*, including many actionable guidelines and step-by-step approaches for fostering a caring environment (such as facilitation strategies for *circulos de cultura*—Freirean culture circles).

As Calvacante et al. (2017) state (translated by the author):

To tend to education is to tend to the germination of humaneness; it is to tend to love. It is not an easy path. It is necessary to feel the heart of nature and perceive the deep and subtle reality of the unfolding of the world in diversity, connection, complexity, self-organization, and transcendence.

We understand education in this way: education that is continuous and biocentric, that is a bond formed from dialogue and love that is born from life and sustained in life. To educate in this way means to participate fully. Those who educate are true Teachers and this, above all, is our inherent Nature inside each of us (p.19).

I had the honor and privilege to participate in a face-to-face immersion training in biocentric education in Fortaleza, Brazil (Universidade Biocêntrica, 2024). The felt experience of loving bonds that are *born from life and sustained in life*, as Calvacante et al. (2017) so beautifully state, animates me to this day. Below I list processes that have helped me create a welcoming heart-space in a variety of educational settings. Several of these are derived from biocentric education, as well as other practices I have learned over the years.

- activities that presence the heart (e.g. meditation, embodiment practices, music, bringing in heartfelt poetry, songs, or artwork)
- room setup and exercises that allow for eye contact and for acknowledging one another (in circles, small groups, dyads)

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- offering open-ended questions that invite curiosity, connection, and reflection from a heart-centered space
- modeling resonant, validating language and appreciation in dialog; This includes
  - modeling conversation prompts that are heart-based and that invite an openness to learn from one another (I love; I appreciate; I wonder; I admire; I am curious; I am noticing)
  - discouraging judgmental language, debates, and competition
  - practicing nonviolent communication and I-statements (Rosenberg, 2015)
  - practicing *resonant language* and active listening. Resonant language refers to a skillset for cultivating caring connection, mutual understanding, emotional intelligence, and embodied knowing based on relational neuroscience (Peyton, 2023)
- strategies to alleviate performance anxiety, grading pressure and competitiveness; This may include
  - allowing for some flexibility with grading deadlines
  - considering grading alternatives in equitable assessment (ASCCC, 2022)
  - leaving online learning spaces openly accessible after a posting deadline so that learners can benefit from content and online dialog for longer periods of time
- encouraging activities that nourish bonds and bonding (e.g. via storytelling, sharing about deeply held values, and sharing from personal experience)
- dyads and small groups to facilitate a more intimate setting of sharing from the heart
- specific practices that foster listening for the heart of the group, such as Freirean culture circles (*circulos the cultura*) (Calvacante et al, 2017)

### 2.4. | Womb Space

Here I am referring to a capacity to hold loving space without needing to know the outcome and learning to trust the natural unfolding of the group gestation, not unlike a mother tending to her fetus without being able to see their developmental process. Qualities include:

- holding space for the unknown; energetically holding the group with warm intention; trusting the process and the self-organizing developments of the group; not needing to know about all interactions; unconditional presence; patience
- letting dialog unfold in various spaces without grading pressure or interfering and without participating in discussion immediately

### 2.5. | Loom Space

Here I am referring to the capacity of the facilitator and participants to weave connections and harvest insights. This may include stitching threads and themes together; naming and appreciating patterns and trends; and introducing frameworks that help learners recognize patterns, themes, and emergent group wisdom. Processes that I regularly use to help learners recognize patterns over space and time include the *Habits of the Systems Thinker* (Waters Center for Systems Change, n.d.); Capra's principles of living systems (Center for Ecoliteracy, n.d.); or brown's *emergent strategy* principles (brown, 2017). Tending to loom space may also include sitting with a fabric in process that feels messy and incomplete without needing to rush to conclusions or neatly tie up ends.

Participants and facilitators can support the weaving in the loom space via various notetaking and recording technologies. These include graphic recording, using creative art processes, creating

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repositories for shared wisdom, such as Google drives, and possibly AI (though I have personally stayed away from AI).

### 2.6. | Root Space

Here I am referring to practices of tapping into learners' individual and collective life source, core values, as well as cultural, ancestral, and intergenerational wisdom, and drawing this deep-seated wisdom up into the learning space like a tree pulling up nutrients through its roots. Metaphorically speaking, as a learning community, each learner-tree belongs to a grove. I have found that exercises that reach into the root space can also help nourish the shared, interconnected root network of the entire cohort. Over time, learners draw nourishment not only by tapping into shared values but also by recognizing and feeling nurtured by differences, like the many symbiotic relationships of species in an ecosystem.

Unlike the official definition of nature by the Oxford English Dictionary, Collins, Merriam Webster, and many other prominent dictionaries—all of which exclude humans from nature—*we are nature* (We are Nature, n.d.).

Going outside into nature, and/or bringing in nature (plants, nature artifacts) offers another opportunity to enliven the learning space and deepen a felt sense of vibrancy in the group. During one of the favorite exercises in my leadership cohorts, learners are invited to sit by a tree and write a story of their lives using the metaphor of a tree. Once everyone has shared their tree story in a group, I highlight core phrases from each individual learner, creating a collective *grove poem*.

### 2.7. | Dream Space

Here I am referring to an invitation to focus on learners' north stars and to reach for their dreams. This dream-nurturing time includes setting specific intentions or goals, as well as giving voice to wild dreams, visions and aspirations (individually and collectively). In the container of a group, it can feel healing, encouraging, and reassuring when learners' dreams are witnessed and held with utmost reverence. One learner's dreams can deeply enliven another learner's dreams. Likewise, powerful new insights, and even unforeseen collaboration opportunities, can arise when noticing shared patterns and insights from dreams (See also loom space above).

### 2.8. | Play and Creative Expression Space

Here I am referring to spaces for learners to let their guards down and engage in playful, creative activities. What is important here is to access what anthropologist and psychologist Rolando Toro (Biodanza Rolando Toro, n.d.) calls *existential creativity*—our capacity for creative expression which is every human being's birthright and not tied to any specific training in the arts. Playful creative expression nurtures the field in the present moment and can help animate the energy in the room, relax tensions, and bring in a sense of lightness via humor and laughter.

### 2.9. | Pub Space

Here I am referring to unstructured times outside the time and space of the learning activity. At conferences or retreats, these unstructured times can be a particularly rich opportunity to cultivate bonds. *Pub space* environments can also soften the boundary between personal and professional space, which can help build trust in a group and facilitate support networks.

### 2.10. | Water Cooler Space

Here I am referring to spaces for informal breaks and unplanned encounters. The proverbial *water cooler conversation* can spark new linkages and connections during a highly structured event. The beauty here is

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that you never know who will show up at the water cooler. Participants may then bring unexpected inspiration back to the whole group.

### 2.11. | Rest and Integration Space

Here I am referring to time periods and spaces that allow for gelling, percolating, and integrating. Nature has cycles and seasons for a reason so that processes can unfold organically.

At many events, there is a tendency to pack in content without ample time for breaks. From a systems perspective, pauses are so important for information to integrate, for connections to develop (inward and outward), and for tense or busy energies to shift. Invitations to power naps, journaling, walks, free-flow creative artwork, and long lunch breaks can make a huge difference in the felt quality of the entire learning experience.

### 2.12. | Ritual Space

Here I am referring to practices that intentionally nourish reverent space. In my dissertation, I have named this function *cultivating membrane awareness* (Widhalm, 2011a,b).

A membrane is a permeable boundary that gives a living system a distinct place to be and evolve. It controls what kind of energy and nutrients migrate across the boundary. It allows for a space nested within larger spaces that also have membranes, nested within yet larger systems and so on. Cell biologist Lipton (2008) considers the membrane a critical aspect of genetic development and evolution, more significant than DNA. From a living systems perspective, boundaries, such as a membrane, are essential for life to unfold (Capra, 1996).

In social systems, a membrane creates a sense of safety, identity, and belonging to a whole distinct from, yet interconnected with, other wholes. As I outline in my dissertation, intentionally creating and tending to membrane awareness greatly supports the transformative learning journey of a group.

Here are some examples for processes that have helped me cultivate membrane awareness:

- special attention to openings and closings; opening the *field* before the event (e.g. praying over the event; setting intentions, meditating, sending participants loving kindness). Opening and closing rituals may include prayers, dedications, quotes, poems, songs, check-in prompts, and check-out prompts.
- energetically inviting healing energies to be present (four directions, ancestors, loved ones); invoking a sacred presence
- invitations to leave things behind or set them aside so participants can be more fully present
- objects in the center of a circle or in a dedicated area (e.g. flowers, scarves, sacred objects, an altar); candles; bells; talking sticks or objects
- specific processes with structured rules, e.g. ISSS roundtable (Gabriel, 2011); world café (Brown, 2005), *circulos de cultura* (Calvacante et. al, 2017) that honor the energy of the circle
- setting and reiterating intentions at the beginning of a gathering; holding a closing round of appreciations

### 2.13. | Den Space (Mama Bear)

Here I am referring to the role of the facilitator as a protector and advocate on behalf of the participants. This may include protecting the space from interruption and/or negative interference; advocating for participants; gathering information/resources needed, and protecting/defending territory.

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### 2.14. | Rules & Accountability Space

Here I am referring to a space dedicated to instrumental tasks, such as grades, performance evaluations, feedback conversations, learning outcome reflections and reminders when people fall behind. I am not elaborating on this space here as these are tasks more commonly associated with the duties of an educator.

### 2.15. | Fourteen Qualities and Counting – What Would You Add?

When I began listing holding-space qualities, I had no idea that fourteen (and counting), albeit closely interrelated, qualities would emerge. Which of these qualities I may draw upon depends on the context but also may be informed by my intuition and what I consider to be my *special sauce* for that particular group. I invite the reader to ponder: What is your special sauce in holding space?

### 3. | Tending to the Guardians of Space

In my experience, holding space is a quality that requires focus, dedication, energy, and practice. As an empath and highly sensitive introvert (Orloff, 2024), I have learned that I need to re-source myself throughout the process of holding space.

Here are some questions I invite the reader to consider:

- What support and resources do I need to lovingly hold space?
- Who is holding space with me? What are our various roles/strengths? What is our process of checking in with each other?
- Do we want to rotate space-holding functions, and if so, how?
- What roles do I want to delegate?
- What would I like to learn from others along the way?
- What practices do I want to learn and hone?
- How long do I want or need to be in a primary space-holding function?
- What are my goals for the group to start self-organizing and holding their own space more? How could I help facilitate this process?
- How do I re-source myself? How do I tend to myself before, during, and after holding space?

I intend to elaborate on these considerations in future writing.

### 4. | When Does Holding Space Lead to Autopoietic Developments?

In my dissertation (Widhalm, 2011a), I developed a list of inquiry questions to help facilitators discern whether autopoietic developments have emerged in a group:

- Are there any new, unplanned developments that have arisen during this learning experience? (connections, relationships, ideas, capacities for empathy and compassion, technologies, designs, calls for action, events, movements)? Any positive ripple effects?
- What may have contributed to these developments arising?
- How can we acknowledge and celebrate these developments? How can we continue to nurture them into being and sustain them? Are they beginning to sustain themselves?
- Are group members experiencing a felt sense of aliveness in the group? Is the group becoming comfortable with prolonged periods of *pregnant silence*? Is the group becoming more friendly and intimate with each other? Are group members becoming more comfortable connecting with each other nonverbally?
- Is the group becoming comfortable with giving and receiving authentic feedback, including in areas of difference and conflict?

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- Are group members beginning to co-create the learning experience and take co-responsibility for the wellbeing of the group?
- Is the group becoming more adaptable to shifts and unexpected changes? Is the group becoming more comfortable with embracing unforeseen developments? Is the group self-organizing?

When I recently reflected on the two learning exemplars I am about to describe, I noticed that most, if not each of these conditions, was in place. The groups had indeed developed autopoietic characteristics.

### 5. | Exemplars: St. Mary's College of California and Merritt College

Below I briefly reflect on some of the nuances and dimensions of holding space discussed so far, based on two learning communities I have facilitated recently.

#### 5.1. | St. Mary's College of California Master of Leadership Studies

The hybrid residential/online Master of Leadership Studies at St. Mary's College of California is rooted in adult and transformative learning theory. Establishing a mutually supportive learning community lies at the heart of the learning journey. In fact, the first required course students enroll in is called *Practices of Building a Learning Community*. From its onset, the program nurtures an atmosphere of welcome. Learners spend ample time getting to know each other via icebreakers, games, and listening activities. Spatial setups and discussion invitations intentionally cultivate membrane awareness (such as room setups in a circle and introducing a practice of check-ins in person and online). Active listening and dialoging with appreciative, affective language (see *heart space* above), and practicing nonviolent communication (Rosenberg, 2015), are core capacities tended to throughout the program.

In my role as a *weaver* (an advising-facilitation role) for my cohort, I prioritized all the qualities of holding space listed above. One of my signature props is to bring in a center piece, such as an empty bowl, a doily, or a scarf. I have found that gathering around a center helps create a sacred space where students can anchor and land. I also wove in multiple opportunities for expressive-creative ways of knowing. For example, as one of the monthly reflection activities, learners created mandalas giving expression to their learning journey so far.

Connecting with nature enlivened the learning experience for all of us. The tree exercise (learners describing their life using the metaphor of a tree) described above was a cohort favorite. The metaphor of a tree carried us through the entire course. The cohort kept referring to it through our closing weekend when one learner facilitated the creation of collective tree. The leaves symbolized different leadership qualities.

As part of cultivating membrane awareness and ritual space, I empowered learners to co-facilitate and even self-facilitate part of their learning experience early on. This may have contributed to them gracefully navigating unexpected administrative changes later in the semester.

In my role of holding *den space* during our weaver meetings, I supported learners in their need to vent or transmute frustrations that had built up within the context of multiple administrative changes. For this purpose, I utilized creative processes (such as writing frustrations on sticky notes and offering them to a symbolic bowl of *fire*).

**Autopoietic developments:** When I reviewed the conditions I laid out in my dissertation for when a group has tapped into their autopoietic potential, (Widhalm, 2011a) I noticed virtually all the criteria I had

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listed at play. I wondered whether the holding-space practices we had nurtured together had supported this cohort in developing their self-organizing potential.

Here are some of the originally unplanned developments that arose from this cohort:

- spearheading a college-wide graduate student association
- self-organizing their closing day in a truly celebratory and meaningful way despite unexpected funding cuts. This included student-led teach-ins, faculty appreciations, self-facilitated refreshments, throwing the first pitch at a baseball game in the name of the cohort, and a closing ceremony that was co-facilitated by a student and me that lasted well beyond our intended closing time as learners showered each other with appreciations
- a system via text and other communication of regularly checking in with each other and making sure no-one fell behind
- attending special events and supporting each others' milestones, and offering heartfelt support through difficult transitions
- opportunities for celebration and fun filled activities, such as holiday elephant gift exchanges
- ongoing friendships and shared activities to this day

**Learner Testimonies:** In their closing reflections, learners wrote about their felt experience of co-creating their learning community together and the conditions that contributed to this. Here are some of the qualities they highlighted:

- the synergy of diverse perspectives
- a felt sense of magic and palpable experience of learning and growing together
- strength in supporting each other and learning together
- cultivating a sense of intimacy together
- how vulnerability was needed for an authentic experience
- how co-creating a container around shared values and intentions supported learners all the way through
- how shared and collaborative leadership was practiced throughout the learning journey and contributed to trust in the unfolding of group wisdom (GSA, 2025)

I am truly grateful that I had the opportunity to accompany this amazing group of learners. I feel changed and enriched as a result.

### 5.2. | Human Values Course at Merritt College

Human Values is an asynchronous 16-week online course at Merritt College, Peralta Community College District in Oakland, California. The course invites learners to interweave inquiries between self, colleagues, their communities, and the web of life at large. It is intended as a mini learning forest that offers learners multiple niches and encounters to learn and grow together.

**Holding-Space Qualities:** Holding space for an entirely asynchronous online experience is different from facilitating a hybrid graduate course, such as the one at St. Mary's College. And yet, many of the same qualities of holding space apply.

As with my hybrid course at St. Mary's College, I dedicate significant time to creating a welcoming container (membrane). For example, I invite extensive check-ins during the first several weeks of the course. This includes an online café for informal dialog and a google map where everyone can post where they are from, along with a picture or small statement of what they appreciate about their place of origin. During their first discussion forum, learners are asked to share questions based on core values, such as

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“One thing I love, one thing I am good at, and one thing that concerns me.” This allows the group to immediately see common values and aspirations from learners they may have otherwise considered as very different.

I try to nurture a felt sense of the learning forest throughout the course via different ways of weaving connections. For example, I invite learners to share stories of significant moments in their lives and to empathically listen to classmates for pivotal themes and core values. During another exercise, learners create their own living-systems poetry, utilizing open-sentence prompts based on nature's organizing principles. Similar to my hybrid course at St. Mary's College, learners are also asked to reflect on their lives as a tree, and to listen from the heart, utilizing I-statements and appreciative, open-hearted resonance language (Peyton, 2017; Rosenberg, 2015). Throughout the course, I invite learners to give voice to their aspirations, their north star, and their dreams, and to hold each other's dreams with utmost reverence.

**The WeRo's Journey:** Over the last year, I introduced a new module for harvesting collective wisdom as a group and paying attention to collective insights. I called this the *WeRo's journey*. The idea of the *WeRo's journey* was inspired by the well-known concept of *the hero's journey* (Campbell, 2025). It elevates the journey to a collective level, honoring the radical interdependence present in learning ecosystems—as a living *we*. Guided by the steps of a *circulo de cultura* (Freirean culture circle) (Calvacante, et al., 2017), I designed a two-week module for learners to review core course takeaways in small groups and to listen for common patterns, insights, and symbols. I invited learners to utilize metaphors of nature and bring in creative ways of expression to give voice to the patterns of collective insight arising. I kept the small groups intentionally open so that other groups could visit each other. We then reconvened as a large group and once again took note of emerging patterns and insights.

**Autopoietic Developments:** Here are some patterns that learners noted as part of their WeRo's journey harvests:

- appreciating the felt quality of practicing kindness, patience, and empathy and naming the healing power of unconditional love and care in an online space
- noticing how authentic sharing encouraged others to be authentic, as well
- feeling pulled to be of service in the community more than before and to step up their leadership roles
- sharing metaphors of nature expressing collective insights of the group members and a sense of interconnectedness with all of life. Metaphors included trees, bees, spiderwebs, and logs with symbiotic life forms on them.
- giving expression to the beauty of holding intentions and nurturing seeds of change as a group (Merritt College, 2025)

I could sense a strong presence of heart, root, dream, loom, and ritual spaces during their WeRo journey shares. Several learners even crafted short metaphor-rich poems, giving voice to their experience of feeling part of a shared web.

### 6. | Closing Reflection

Our relationship lives in the space between us. It doesn't live in me or in you or even in the dialogue between the two us – it lives in the space we live together and that space is sacred space.

—Martin Buber

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As I revisit my experience of holding space for the two beautiful cohorts introduced above, and many other groups before them, I am filled with deep gratitude and humility. I wonder how many more nuances of holding space I will discover in years to come, and I am curious to learn from the readers' discoveries, as well.

Chris Bache (Bache, 2008), one of my dissertation advisors, surrounds his group of learners in loving awareness before each class period. I am reminded of this practice now as I reflect on how my approach of tending to space has evolved over time. I realize that for me, holding space is, above all, a reverent offering, not unlike a prayer. As Buber states, the space we live together is sacred space (Buber, 2010).

Bringing in a living systems perspective once more, I consider the practice of holding space inherently forgiving, adaptive, emergent, and rich in autopoietic surprises. As a facilitator, I contribute to creating conditions for a vibrant learning forest. From day one, I begin the process of letting go and staying open to what may unfold. By cultivating membrane awareness together as a group, our curiosity animates the spoken and unspoken, written and unwritten wisdom bubbling up, birthing new possibilities together.

Wisdom teacher (now ancestor) Joanna Macy is known for saying: "Your heart is not an object that can break... But if it were, they say the heart that breaks open can hold the whole universe. Your heart is that large. Trust it" (Macy, 1989, p.191). I believe the same is true for a group of learners: When a group of learners holds space with utmost care, there is a collective heart that starts beating—a group heart that can heal divides, and that can hold the whole universe.

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