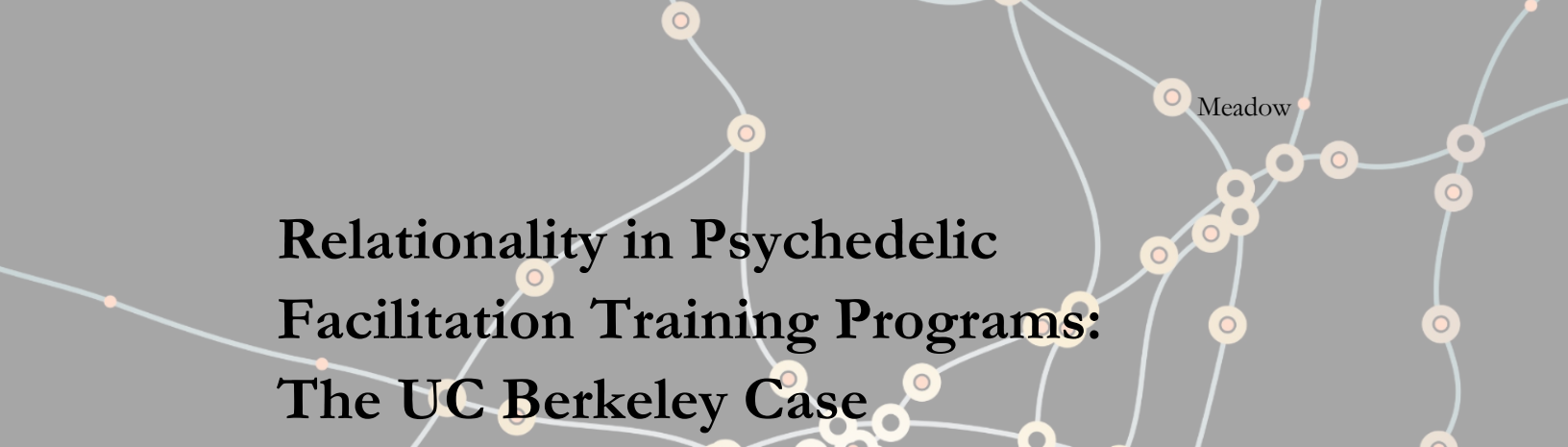




Relationality in Psychedelic Facilitation Training Programs: The UC Berkeley Case

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ABSTRACT:

Psychedelic medicine must embrace high-quality, culturally sensitive, relational, and community-based education of facilitators in order to reduce risks and increase benefits. The University of California, Berkeley Psychedelic Facilitation Certificate Program (UC Berkeley PFCP) aims to provide this training through a mindfully crafted program. This paper outlines the UC Berkeley training model, focusing particularly on the training program's relational and culturally sensitive approach. This model is one we believe should be adopted by other psychedelic training programs to improve the quality of facilitation and create a robust network of skilled practitioners.

Introduction

The UC Berkeley Psychedelic Facilitation Certificate Program (PFCP) is a laboratory school that was developed within the University of California, Berkeley's Center for the Science of Psychedelics and will be housed within the Berkeley School of Education beginning in 2025. The PFCP has been training psychedelic facilitators since 2022. It bridges educational theory and practice by designing, testing, and refining best practices in the professional preparation of aspiring facilitators. The PFCP integrates the contributions of a diverse team of instructor practitioners, including specialists in ayahuasca, psilocybin mushrooms, *huachuma*, peyote, MDMA, ketamine, and *salvia divinorum*. Each of these psychedelic medicines carries its own risks, benefits, and practices, and the program's instructor-practitioners are able to effectively teach these nuances...¹

During its first two years, the Berkeley PFCP classroom included fewer than 30 students...² A reduction in philanthropic support required the cohort to double to 60 students in its third year. The program remains smaller than most available psychedelic training programs and maintains a unique in-person format. Learners participate in a nine-month, 200-hour program, including 160 instructional hours delivered through multi-day in-person

Recommended citation: Meadow, Moana. "Relationality in Psychedelic Facilitation Training Programs: The UC Berkeley Case." In *Psychedelic Intersections: 2024 Conference Anthology*, edited by Jeffrey Breau and Paul Gillis-Smith. Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School, 2025. © License: CC BY-NC. <https://doi.org/10.70423/0001.09>

¹ Thank you to early contributors Brian Anderson, Celina De Leon, and Eve Ekman; first-year contributors Kristina Hunter, Susana Bustos, Joe Zamaria, Kat Harrison, Mary Sanders and Kylea Taylor; and second-year contributors Sylver Quevedo and Angella Okawa.

² This was made possible by three anonymous donors, who supported one development year and two implementation years, by the Joe and Sandy Samberg Foundation, who supported two implementation years, and by Healing Hearts, Changing Minds, which supported one implementation year.

immersions. Small-group and online learning complement in-person meetings, as does a 40-hour hands-on practicum that provides students with direct experiences facilitating altered states of consciousness.

In designing the Berkeley PFCP program, we kept a number of questions in mind: How can the program encourage diverse contributors? How can it approach psychedelic medicines with respect and use them for their best purposes? How can the program approach psychedelics with humility and reciprocity, ensure their safe use, and maintain their availability to people from different cultures and for future generations?

This essay explores the program's response to these questions and charts the program's development. We will focus on key features of the PFCP model: instructional collaboration between spiritual care and other healthcare providers; small, in-person learning groups; long-term relationships among instructors, students, and their spiritual and professional communities; and the inclusion of traditional lineage holders. These approaches empower trainees to engage in ethical, reciprocal, and just applications of powerful psychedelic medicine allies. They are also approaches that can be transferred and adopted by other psychedelic training programs to improve the quality and depth of training.

What is a Psychedelic Facilitator?

Psychedelic facilitation is a form of physical, emotional, and spiritual support provided before, during, and after an individual or group undergoes a psychedelic experience. In our understanding, facilitation might be performed by researchers, healthcare professionals, spiritual and religious groups, and/or Indigenous communities. For example, in Indigenous communities, what we call a “psychedelic facilitator” may be a community healer, a medicine person, a shaman, a doctor, or another care professional. Training for such facilitators may be passed down through apprenticeship with family members and endorsed by the community. Psychedelic facilitation also occurs in doctor's offices or other clinical settings (e.g., ketamine treatment), in FDA-approved research settings (e.g., MDMA trials), and in state-regulated service centers (e.g., psilocybin in Oregon). These facilitation settings are particularly relevant for PFCP trainees from the United States. Facilitators in these settings are generally clinicians or other licensed professionals and may have enrolled in one of a variety of virtual psychedelic training programs, which range in duration and often include large cohorts of over 100 trainees. Given the variety of contexts and training approaches, facilitators' knowledge bases and skill sets can differ significantly.

What is a Culturally Sensitive Curriculum?

Our training addresses the needs of people from diverse faith traditions and communities of origin. PFCP prioritizes recruiting student cohorts from communities that were historically underserved or harmed by our healthcare system. We provide financial support³ to students from communities and professions traditionally earning less (e.g., marginalized groups and occupations such as ministry and social work). The program has committed 20-30% of enrollment fees to scholarships for marginalized groups and provides 1:1 or small-group mentoring to support their success. This has enabled the formation of diverse training cohorts. In 2024-2025, 50% of the students identified as BIPOC, 40% as LGBTQIA+, and 35% as first or second-generation immigrants.

Throughout the curriculum, we explore positionality, ethics, systemic marginalization, and sociocultural structures of power. The program focuses on nine core domains of knowledge: spiritual care; psychotherapeutic methods; ancestral entheogenic traditions; clinical science and research; justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion; contemplative practice; ethics;

³ Annual support available is dependent on philanthropy secured each year.

reciprocity and ecological awareness; and somatic awareness. Although there isn't space to detail these domains, they inform the curriculum and approach to care taught by the PFCP. For example, in the domain of spiritual care, students learn the basics of spiritual development, assessment, preparation, and integration, as well as the applications of spiritual care in specific settings. They also have the opportunity to engage with and create individual and communal rituals throughout the training, such as building altars together.

Program training alternates between didactic classes and experiential sessions. Didactic classes cover topics such as research methods, facilitation techniques, and harm-reduction strategies. Experiential or participatory sessions may feature role plays, demonstrations, or live facilitation with psychedelic medicines. Our small cohort size allows for a conversational tone throughout training, and students are encouraged to ask questions and help guide the conversation. We maintain intimacy by breaking the cohort into smaller groups and inviting alumni to return as Second-Year Fellows to remain connected to the program.

The PFCP leadership seeks a reciprocal learning relationship with students, who will soon be peers and colleagues in the field. Instructors openly share their own experiences, challenges, and resources. Through trust and collaboration, the program tailors the curriculum regularly based on feedback and the needs of our students. Dr. Tina Trujillo, a UC Berkeley Professor of Education and the Faculty Director of the Certificate Program, oversees this internal evaluation. She provides feedback from every instructional module and assesses the quality of the training, cohort diversity, and program interdisciplinarity.

A Relational Learning Community

Our core instructors are long-term staff members from a wide range of professions, hold expertise in varying aspects of the curriculum, and carry diverse identities and backgrounds. The team has a wealth of experience with psychedelics, including working with these substances in professional, spiritual, communal, individual, therapeutic, celebratory, religious, legal, and illegal settings. This experience shapes how the team approaches their facilitation work and allows them to speak to diverse uses, methods, and community structures. The program models to students an interdisciplinary approach that values differing perspectives. To further support this, we cultivate an environment where fellow instructors feel comfortable disagreeing with one another during lessons, sharing their perspectives and experiences, and modeling the complexity of thought in the psychedelic space. Likewise, we encourage students to bring their distinct perspectives to the classroom and their psychedelic work.

Critically, our students learn from us because they feel they can trust us. Instructors speak transparently, and to the extent they feel comfortable, revealing their personal histories and experiences. Psychedelic experiences have been life-changing for some, and sharing those stories with others is invaluable. At the same time, the program recognizes that individuals and groups carry disparate levels of privilege and may feel more or less safe revealing personal stories. The program highlights and discusses the complexity of privilege and safety to attune trainees to this complexity in their work. Our instructors build relationality in the program by making eye contact, asking questions and waiting for the answers, presenting themselves as real human beings rather than infallible experts, and getting on the floor to roleplay psychedelic sessions.

Our pedagogy similarly emphasizes a relational approach. For example, I use a whiteboard rather than slides when I teach, which allows me to sit back, take in the people in the room, and speak from my heart. Laws and social mores are always changing; political climates come and go. However, the human experience and the wisdom that comes from life experience are, we believe, valuable across generations, cultures, and regulatory environments. Our relational approach attempts to share this life wisdom with students.

The ongoing criminalization of psychedelics inevitably informs our program. As a federally funded⁴ public university, we must conform to federal laws. At the same time, instructors enjoy freedom of speech and are comfortable talking about the diverse applications of psychedelics, legal and illegal. Our program approaches care not only in terms defined by licensing or regulatory boards but also in terms of equity, access, global health, and ecological reparations. This means instructors are honest with our students about the challenges and opportunities across psychedelic settings and seek to equip facilitators with the knowledge they need to navigate distinct legal and regulatory environments.

Training in Community

PFCP believes that instructors should know the people they train. We want students to leave our program with the tools they need to succeed, which is more likely when instructors have a working knowledge of students' inner lives, families, communities, finances, insecurities, and temptations. This intimacy is time-consuming and resource-intensive; the deep learning our program instills must be developed slowly. To support this, we use shared agreements in the classroom to ensure privacy is protected, emphasize listening and speaking with respect, encourage social repair and reconciliation, and motivate exploring new ideas.

Our training also instills strong bonds between students. Our small, localized cohorts meet on weekends to meet each other's families. Our alumni and students have developed communities across the country and internationally. Program affiliates now work together in settings ranging from ketamine clinics to clinical trials and on fundraisers for PFCP scholarships. We are encouraged that our slow, careful approach to community building results in strong ties even years after a cohort concludes.

Ethical care is another critical component of facilitation. The psychedelic space will ultimately benefit from broadly agreed-upon safety measures for facilitators, clients, and patients, but until those are developed, these guidelines must be cultivated within individual communities. The program supports students in developing community ethics and navigating ethical dilemmas using the “InnerEthics Peer Consultation Group” model.⁵ This model, developed by therapist Kylea Taylor, provides a structured approach to peer support based on small group sharing and feedback. The approach emphasizes acceptance, personal insight, and communal support to navigate challenging situations.

Hands-on Learning

The psychedelic state and providing care for those in altered states cannot be conveyed through words alone. It is helpful for facilitators to have direct experience of altered states that they can reference when supporting clients. Similarly, clients often prefer that facilitators have such direct experience themselves.⁶ To address this, the PFCP has offered three different opportunities for experiential learning, all of which are optional and conform to federal law. These are:

- 1) **A holotropic breathwork workshop:** Music and verbal cues guide participants

⁴ The Berkeley PFCP receives no funding from the University of California or any government program. It is funded entirely by private philanthropy and enrollment fees. Thanks to RiverStyx, Paul Stamets, the Healing Hearts Changing Minds foundation, and a new anonymous donor who are supporting our program this year.

⁵ Developed and taught by Kylea Taylor in: Kylea Taylor, *Peer consultation groups and ethical awareness tools for psychedelic practitioners* (Hanford Mead, 2024) and Kylea Taylor, *The ethics of caring: Finding right relationship with clients* (Hanford Mead, 2017).

⁶ Mitch Earleywine et al. “How Important Is a Guide Who Has Taken Psilocybin in Psilocybin-Assisted Therapy for Depression?,” *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* 55 (2022): 1-11.

through intensive breathing, which leads to psychedelic-type altered states of consciousness. Additionally, participants provide care to one another, complete art-based integration, and participate in community sharing. To provide a safe and accessible entry point into altered states of consciousness, facilitators and participants must be educated on current touch consent practices and conform to university guidelines.

- 2) **Ketamine facilitation:** With instructor guidance, students practice facilitation for a patient prescribed ketamine. Ketamine is a federally regulated prescription drug that is used to treat depression, anxiety, and pain. It can produce highly variable experiences in patients. Group administration allows trainees to observe and support diverse situations in a single session.
- 3) ***Salvia divinorum*:** This shrub is not federally regulated and is legal for adult use in certain states, including California. Students who participate in this session chew the fresh leaves in a ceremony-style setting. They may experience a psychedelic alteration of consciousness and receive visions or messages.

Though limited in scope, these three opportunities have provided PFCP graduates with a lived understanding of the complex, embodied nature of psychedelic experience and facilitation. The program leadership hopes students leave these experiences humbled by how little they truly know. That humility creates a space for the beginnings of wisdom to take root, though we believe deep wisdom can only accrue through years of dedicated practice and community support. Our training program provides a foundation for both of those key ingredients—practice, and community—to develop.

Conclusion

Psychedelic medicines hold the capacity for great healing. Unfortunately, ethical transgressions, inadequate medical screening or response, and difficult client experiences do occur. These adverse outcomes are more likely when facilitators have insufficient training, limited experience, and lack communities of accountability. This underscores the need for high-quality, relational psychedelic education. UC Berkeley's PFCP is one model for this type of psychedelic facilitator education. By supporting integrated dialogue and relationship-building, this training and others like it allow learners to better provide ethical, safe support for psychedelics users.