Group as Teacher :

The Gestalt informed Peer-Learning Community as a Transpersonal Vehicle for Organisational Healing

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Abstract

After reviewing Gestalt's parity with Zen and Taoism, this paper illuminates the evolution of the Gestalt informed peer-learning community emergence from out of the tradition of Therapeutic Community Practice (Main 1946), before exploring the potential of the same to engender development and healing. Running parallel to this review of organisational renewal is a case study of change in a university setting and the fostering of a peer-learning community in an established charismatic organisation. Within the body of the text four qualitative research methods are integrated, an analysis of organisational culture is performed through the application of a diagnostic tool derived from the Gestalt's contact-withdrawal cycle (Critchley & Casey 1989), community dynamics are assessed via field analysis (Lewin 1952; Parlett 1993), action research (Lewin 1947) is used to collaboratively inquire into the success the Gestalt informed peer-learning community through the voices of its participants, and a case study approach is employed to illuminate the day-to-day drama of facilitating cultural change within a resistive commercial setting. Lastly, the author illuminates learning he has accrued as a change agent and offers insights to help others who may wish to establish similar peer-learning communities in a commercial setting.

Key words: Gestalt; Zen, Taoism, Peer-Learning Community; Organisational Healing; Change.

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Paul Barber (April 2004)

> *"Deep within every life, no matter how dull or ineffectual it may seem from the outside, there is something eternal happening. This is the secret way that change and possibility conspire with growth. John Henry Newman summed this up beautifully with the idea that to grow is to change and to be perfect is to have changed often. Change, therefore, need not be threatening; it can in fact bring our lives to perfection"* (O'Donohue 1997 p164).

Preamble: To motivate and develop personnel while fostering a co-operative team spirit presents a major challenge for business communities of the 21st Century (Waitley 1995; RSA 1995; Barber 2002). To this end this paper sets out to examine the gains and challenges of using a Gestalt informed peer-learning community within a commercially-based master's to nurture co-operation and personal development. On ancient maps in locations where danger was thought to exist the traveller was warned 'there be dragons'. This account raises awareness to the organisational dragons that await Gestalt inspired change agents.

The Transpersonal Nature of Gestalt - Being Here and Unfolding Now

Gestalt, as a phenomenological whole field research tool (Barber 2003), works primarily with what we can see, hear and feel, rather than what is thought or interpreted. This is not to say that intellect and interpretation are dismissed, but rather that conceptualisation comes second to the refinement of 'immediate experience' and a 'felt sense' (Yontef 1996) in the formation of a holistic 'picture of awareness'. Awareness is then further stalked by inquiry into an individual or group's immediate experience of their environment. In this way 'awareness' is both a method of inquiry and a desired outcome, and Gestalt groups are not so much tools for qualitative inquiry as data itself on a journey of discovery.

In terms of its transcendental qualities, Gestalt's transpersonal nature owes much to: i) field theory (Lewin 1952) – with its multiple laminations of holistic reality; ii) the cultivation of an "I-Thou" relationship (Buber 1980) – which facilitates a meeting

with the divine through authentic and robust contact; iii) attention upon what is unfolding now – so as to awaken us to the moment. In this regard, Gestalt has much in common with Zen, which emphasises heightened concentration upon present experience so as to achieve 'ah-ha illumination', plus Taoism, which suggests we must surrender our ego in order to enrich our contact and be one with the universal field that runs through and around us.

As one of the oldest Taoist/Zen saying reminds us that acceptance is key to our spiritual awakening:

> *"The Perfect Way is only difficult for those who pick and choose;*
> *Do not like, do not dislike: all will be clear"*
> *(Seng-ts'an quoted in Suzuki 1950 p 24).*

Such impersonal godliness as this is sometimes hard for a Western mind to grasp, but should come as second nature to a Gestalt practitioner alive to the ever fluid moment and the intelligent self-constellating field. Though Taoism and Zen suggest that the divine is within all things, and everything should be treated with respect, we are nevertheless cautioned that this is not a gentle way:

> *"From Japanese bushido, or `way of the warrior', we learn three keys for*
> *making aggressive energy serve our creative visions: be present, be*
> *concentrated, and be strong" (Boldt 1993 p 63).*

Fritz Perls acknowledged his indebtedness to Zen (Perls 1947), and Joseph Zinker, who spent much time with Gestalt's founding father, has observed of his teacher…

> *"What hasn't survived about Fritz – is his presence. He was like a Zen*
> *master who taught you by… smearing himself all over you, in the most*
> *powerful way. He made you sit up" (Zinker interviewed by Barber 2001 p 30).*

Note how this image of Gestalt is far from the watered-down, institutionalized and sanitized clinical 'professional presence' taught to many Gestalt psychotherapy trainees.

In Gestalt, Zen and Taoism alike, we are encouraged to empty our mind, to "lose our heads and come to our senses", so that with an open mind and heart we might be guided by what is vibrant, alive and unfolding. Gestalt's attention to what is in process of becoming and dissolving, the breathing in and out of the fertile void, has been compared to going with the flow of Yin and Yang (Woldt & Ingersoll 1991) – twin forces of emergence and dissolution. Tao-like, Gestaltist practitioners further contend that if we go with the flow and innate intelligence of the relational field, all the resource we need to proceed will be revealed (Zinker 1977). In Western terms, Gestalt is spiritual in a Quaker way, in that you are encouraged to clear your chattering mind and wait for the spirit/field to inform you. By stopping the course of our mind and through a loosening of the psycho-social mechanisms that hold our

phenomenological world together, Gestalt encourages something other to flood in. In this light, education, in the Gestalt mode, akin to Zen, is less like filling a bucket and more like lighting a fire.

In summary, as agents of inquiry, Gestalt, Zen and Taoism alike invite you into experiential engagement. But once in contact, what do you do next? Well, you might begin to explore the following hypotheses – which Huxley (1951 quoted in Bolt 1993) suggests belong to no single spiritual tradition yet underpin the essence of them all – and so begin an inquiry into your own core nature:

1. We live in a phenomenological world shaped by individual consciousness, which itself represents a manifestation of the divine ground/field from whence everything is drawn and has being.
2. We as human beings are capable of discovering this divine ground/field by experiential engagement, especially when we are subject to experiences that are designed to bypass our ego and to awaken to the intimate relationship between the knower and the known.
3. We possess an eternal self which co-exists alongside a socially constructed phenomenological self, and that this aspect of our dual nature may be awakened through "shocks" or "a-ha experiences" which confront us with new gestalts relating to this, our core nature (adapted from Aldous Huxley's introduction to 'The Song of God: Bhagavad Gita', trans Swami Prabhavananda & Christopher Isherwood 1951 quoted p li (Introduction) in Boldt 1993).

Individuals of the Gestalt informed peer-learning community described in this paper, in plenary group and learning sets regularly attended to what was phenomenologically unfolding – now, and were in this way encouraged to put to test the worth of the above notions. Later in this paper, two models, fruits of reflective inquiry into our phenomenological reality and the nature of self are presented for consideration.

The Therapeutic Community - The Seed of the Gestalt Peer-Learning Community

The term 'Therapeutic Community' was first used by Tom Main (1946) to describe a 'social milieu' whole field approach to mental illness that evolved at the Northfield's Military Hospital during the last war. This model, which treats the community group rather than the individuals within it, held individuals responsible to the community while inviting them to experiment with more satisfying patterns of relating and communal decision making.

At the same time as Main was developing his vision via family therapy at the Cassel Hospital, his colleague Maxwell Jones (1952) began experimenting with large group analysis with sociopaths at the Henderson Hospital (Rappoport 1960). The author believes it is no accident that this community approach to mental health was born in a time of war, in the military where alienation was rife, and during a period when society was itself spiritually dis-at-eased.

In behavioural terms, the Therapeutic Community (TC), though group analytically informed (Pines 1983), in a like manner to field theory (Lewin 1952) and Gestalt (Parlett 1991) emphasises the wider community context to which the individual relates. Focusing upon the systemic energy/field of the immediate community, it attempts to shape group culture through the injection of 'democratic decision-making', 'efficient communication', 'experimentation' and 'reality confrontation' (Rapoport 1960). Underpinning this approach is the working hypothesis that an individual's pathology is related to stressful environments, deficient group leadership and low moral (Jensen 1980). This implies that disease is to be found not only in our physiological body but also in our 'socio-cultural' and 'organisational' bodies, our wider holistic field, which can similarly benefit from therapeutic and healing intervention.

While militarism and functionalism of the Thirties welded the individual to the nation's 'War Machine' the TC from the late Forties sought to set them free:

> *"The therapeutic community involves the total community in a culture of enquiry into the nature of social processes within, and how these truly succeed or fail in caring for the specific individuals in it..." (Main 1980 p 53).*

The above 'culture of enquiry', in the author's experience, goes much deeper in terms of developing our social and emotional intelligence than the learning company (Pedler et al 1997) or the peer learning community described by Heron (1974). Indeed, it houses many of those qualities we have more recently begun to associate with such trends as Servant-Leadership (Spears 2002), which amongst other things stresses: getting in touch with the inner voice and seeking to understand what one's body, spirit and mind are communicating; empathy; healing and the search for wholeness; a commitment to fostering awareness; convincing others rather than to coercing compliance through positional authority; nurturing the ability to dream great dreams; intuition; stewardship and holding what is deemed valuable in trust for others; commitment to growth and building community. All of which are enhanced by a Gestalt climate.

From the 1940's through to the 1970's the TC was viewed as a counter-cultural force, but by the 1980's it began to impact more widely upon conventional practice and to shed its status as a 'movement' for the mantle of an accepted 'method'. At which time it also gained recognition as an instrument for training (Gauthier 1980; Hawkins 1980).

The author's first encounter with the embryonic Therapeutic 'Educational' Community occurred at the Henderson Hospital in the early 1970's, where in order to replicate a Therapeutic Community experience, rotation was encouraged between small analytic groups, experiential workshops, seminars, cooking and cleaning groups, plus a large community group some 30-40 strong. This latter experience, where the community came together to reflect long and deeply upon the processes in which it was engaged, produced many Zen-like moments (i.e., when silence and impasse would suddenly give way to spontaneous insights and learning). Indeed, the Group Analytic style of following the emerging group process and describing the group flow via metaphor, as I found out later, had much in common with Gestalt. I was particularly impressed by the blend of

intellectual and experiential learning stimulated through the healthy antagonism of psychoanalytic approaches and humanistic psychology, one analytic and containing, the other exploratory and socially engaging. Two contrasting ends of the human inquiry continuum were in this way brought together.

Group as Teacher - Towards a Gestalt informed Model of Learning

Following my attendance on the Therapeutic 'Educational' Community programme cited above, as an educator interested in 'community' and affective education (Krathwol et al 1964) I experimented with integrating Rapoport's (1960) principles of therapeutic community practice to my teaching, with the effect:

> *"Content was still transmitted and students still sat exams, but we paused more often to reflect upon `what we were doing' and `how we were doing it'. Simply, we began to examine the social cement that held us together. As a consequence, energy rose, learners seemed to show greater emotional commitment and my teaching gained a `real life' feel and a social inquiry edge" (Barber 1996 p242).*

But there was still something missing. My analytic bias seemed to venerate the teacher's authority while infantilising the student. A little later, as Director of the Certificate in Therapeutic Community Practice, a course conjointly created by the Association of Therapeutic Communities and the Royal College of Nursing I had opportunity to experiment further. Becoming increasingly frustrated with what were taken to be analytic givens, such as the necessity of transference, I began to feed into the Therapeutic "Educational" Community phenomenological inquiry and field theory through the medium of Gestalt (Perls 1947). Gestalt's emphasis upon dialogue, the creation of authentic relationships and holistic phenomenological inquiry, helped loosen the group analytic foundation in two ways:

i) It brought and field theory (Lewin 1952) with its holistic vision and phenomenological inquiry into the frame to support open experimentation rather than the workings of a mysterious 'analytically inspired' unconscious, so that what were previously taken to be 'analytic givens' now become 'working hypotheses for testing'.

ii) It countered the pathological orientation of psychoanalysis, where the facilitator remains distant and opaque so as to invite transference (emotionalised prior learning), and in place promoted a facilitative transparency which encouraged quality person-to-person contact, authentic dialogue and collaborative inquiry within the present, in contrast to a fixation upon the effects of the past.

This tailoring of Gestalt to peer-learning I subsequently transported to Surrey University and the group strand of the MSc in Change Agent Skills and Strategies (Barber 1996), a 2 year part-time masters programme where students in the first year explore change and developmental processes and in the second year rehearse the same under guidance. As to the emergent learning this Gestalt informed community seemed to inspire, earlier studies (Barber 1990; 1996) have illuminated the model described in **Figure 1**.

Hopefully this review has both orientated you to the origins of the Gestalt inspired peer learning community while contextualising the master's programme, the organisational intervention cited in this paper.

Into the Dragon's Lair - Organisational Resistance's to Change

Following a well received 2 day experiential workshop on group facilitation within a consultancy firm in central England, the company's founder and Chairman approached me with a view to developing his organisation further. As most staff, including the major power holders had been personally recruited by him in the 1980's through seminaries which incorporated a potent mixture of group encounter and charismatic spirituality, he exercised enormous political power and personal control within company-life, and had the 'authority' to recruit me to his creation.

As discussions progressed an off-campus company-based masters in change was suggested, but negotiations were not smooth sailing. The University saw the company's eagerness to get things under way as pushy and careless, and the company saw the University's slow over-careful response time as faint-hearted. Bear in mind

Figure 1

EXPERIENTIAL LEVELS OF GESTALT INSPIRED REFLECTION - *LEARNING TO BE WHOLE*

i) **Reflecting upon Physical-Sensory Phenomenon:**
[Gathering and attending to sensory information - developing sensory intelligence]

Learning to observe and listen:- attending to the environment; focusing upon what is presented; identifying physical support systems; differentiating between thoughts and feelings and observations; developing awareness and sensitivity to our physiological needs.

ii) Reflecting upon Social-Cultural Phenomenon:
[Relating and understanding the cultural context - developing social intelligence]

Learning about how we socially and intellectually structure and relate:- forming rules and roles; informing others; prescribing; reflecting in a critical way; defining the purpose and task; building a learning community; creating a safe environment; meeting relational needs.

iii) Reflecting upon Emotional-Transferential Phenomenon:
[Expressing and directing emotional energy - developing emotional intelligence]

Learning about our emotional responses and patterns:- understanding and expressing feelings; releasing blockages of emotional energy; reviewing how our present relates to our past; raising awareness to family scripts; releasing ourselves from the presenting past.

iv) Reflecting upon Imaginal-Projective Phenomenon:
[Exploring and integrating imagination with the self - developing self intelligence]

Learning about the hidden self:- identifying our sub-personalities; illuminating inner motives and ego defences; unpacking how imagination informs us; exploring our persona and ego needs; undoing projective identifications and control dramas; raising the shadow.

v) Reflecting upon Intuitive-Transpersonal Phenomenon:
[Becoming and speculating upon potential beyond the self - developing spiritual intelligence]

Learning about how and where we belong:- valuing ourselves and others; becoming authentic and identifying core values; developing holistic vision; illuminating your life's purpose; awakening to wisdom above and beyond the self; relating ourselves to the cosmos.

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the company's culture emphasised 'will', and it was commonly believed that if you wanted something desperately enough, you would get what you desired. Due to the University's caution the company became increasingly agitated and demanding, and the University largely in retaliation became nit-picking and legalistic with regard to its own contractual arrangements and guarantees. This resistance, I suggest, is symptomatic of the cultural dynamic explored below.

Gestalt informed consultants often see organisations as living fields which sometimes become stuck within a 'sensation-withdrawal cycle' (Critchley & Casey), and suggest that all living things, organisations included, may be diagnosed and facilitated towards health through an attention and address of the following phases:

sensation (sensory feedback from the self and environment);

awareness (alertness to feelings and needs);
mobilisation of energy (raising motivation for need fulfilment);
excitement (engagement of physiological energy);
action (behavioural enactment);
contact (meeting with an experience of satisfaction);
withdrawal (natural completion and rest).

Taking this model as our guide, university culture in general, and the department to which the author was attached in particular, had seemingly become stuck between 'awareness' and the 'mobilisation of energy'. When teams or organisations are stuck at this point there is much intellectual rumination but little action, for fear of unleashing powerful emotions which would threaten or overwhelm the existing intellectual controls. Projecting blame and holding on to hurts and angers is seen to be the norm in these so-called 'knowing-and-angry organisations' (Critchley & Casey 1989). Organisations representative of minority groups commonly exhibit these symptoms, and the author's department, promoting such fringe activities as experiential learning and humanism on a predominately engineering and technological campus, fits neatly into this category.

Still, persistence, flexibility and remaining in dialogue won out in the end, for after a prolonged period of floating in limbo and mounting frustration, realising it was impossible to supply the securities being demanded from the university, the author forced the pace by re-framing the proposed off-site masters as an on-going field experiment. To the University experimentation was kosher, even if partnership was not, and this re-framing was enough to sanctify and seed a fledgling commercial-academic partnership.

Within six months interviews were completed and a commercially based MSc was under way with a cross-section of 24 participants from executive, middle-management and the shop floor.

Awakening Dragons - Fostering a Dialogical Approach to Learning

In the introductory 3 day block of the commercially based masters, within a palatial commercial building where the cognitive agenda was to raise awareness to the nature of learning and our affective task was to bond as a peer-learning community, participants and tutors began to evolve a way of being together. At the start of each day we spent 30-90 minutes – depending upon the nature of the emerging issues, seated in a community circle raising attention to current individual and community learning needs, while reflecting upon the dynamics we co-created together. This process was often akin to group meditation, with long silences and an eventual surfacing of conflicts and frustrations. It also provided opportunity for tutors to role-model resolution of the same through timely facilitation and processing. Following this attunement and community checking-in process we generally set about planning how we would address the academic content of the day, inclusive of mini-lectures, experiential experiments, self-

directed activity and assignment preparation. At the close of the day participants came together as a plenary group to debrief, share evaluations and celebrate gains, and to say their goodbyes.

Within this first 3 day meeting a good deal of old scores and resentments surfaced. My notes of the time recorded in field theory terms clustered around questions surfaced by Parlett (1991) and divided into subheadings of 'external impressions', 'my internal reactions' and 'possible future action', record the following:

"a) How are people and events organised here?
External Impressions:
- Historically, a core group of people appear to have lived, loved, fallen in and out of love and been friends for what seems like forever in this community.
- Some of the longer serving members of the community appear to take it on themselves - and be looked to by others - to police the community rules.
- Community members, being familiar with "other people's stuff", tend to ridicule or laugh at those who act characteristically and/or true to the company stereotype.
- To be female in this organisation seems to confer a stronger position from which to emotionally bully others.
- Some individuals seem to need to over-state their difference to avoid being swamped by the group.
My Internal Reactions:
- Shock at how punitive some women of this community are permitted to be, almost as if they have divine protection or a permit to abuse.
- Surprise at the carefulness of the men.
Possible Future Action:
- Facilitate an all male and all female group in a fish-bowl setting?
- Investigate further the male and female stereotypes this culture produces?
- Look at the role "sex" plays as a competitive and/or controlling tool?
- Examine how male and female roles in the community keep each other trapped?

b) What influences of the present field explain current behaviour?
External Impressions:
- A highly competitive group with strong players for power and dominance.
- Powerful members make long speeches rather than enter into dialogue with others.
- Tendency to "tell people how it is" rather than enquire.
- Competition for attention and air-time.
My Internal Reactions:
- With so much being said it is not easy to be heard or to enter gently into the group.
Possible Future Action:
- Encourage attention and more sensitive listening and role model same?
- Facilitate exercise in deeper levels of listening with the heart as well as the ear?

c) What is unique about the present field?
External Impressions:
- A gifted group of individuals who are potential stars in their own right.

- The organisation seems to genuinely value people and appears to offer opportunities for individuals to maximise their potential.
- Senior management appears person centred and caring.
- People appear to want a "quick fix" rather and actionable skills, rather than to mindfully and carefully acquire the same.
- This is "people pleasing culture" (quote).
- Individuals openly share their personal and transpersonal beliefs.
- Individuals can be very loving and caring of each other.
- Some individuals very committed to the organisation and some appear trapped within it.

My Internal Reactions:
- I find this group very easy to like.

Possible Future Action:
- Monitor and draw attention to the community's development?

d) <u>What is in the process of becoming?</u>
External Impressions:
- If the quieter members are permitted to stay quiet and the noisier ones noisy, the community will split into activators and those who hold hidden resentments and hurts?
- If things go on as they are a 1960's encounter group could become the norm?

My Internal Reactions:
- I was aware of letting this run this time round to get at the emerging pattern, so as to see the organic form this group co-creates.
- I was fascinated by how sophisticated and yet naive the community could be.

Possible Future Action:
- Gently encourage the quieter ones to speak and noisier ones to hold back?
- Challenge each individual to break their usual group pattern?
- Let the pattern run until the community sorts itself out?
- Facilitate an event that illuminates the emerging pattern?
- Combine the above approaches?
- Go with the trend and run an encounter group?

e) <u>What am I blind to or excluding at this time?</u>
External Impressions:
- I sometimes came out more strongly then I intended when policing the ground-rules of striving to be authentic, respecting others, or in focusing the group upon what was happening "now".
- Conflict seemed to be held onto until near the end, when all manner of grievances arose as time was conveniently running out.
- A tendency for senior community members to swing a little between depending and rebelling against authoritative facilitation.

My Inner Reactions:
- Having an acute sense of impatience when - in a personal biased way - I felt that "time", or "my
* time" was being squandered.*

- I believe the under tone of my communication was "life is too short for us to waste playing out the usual rescuer-victim-persecutory dramas you play out to get attention here".
- Held back my power to let others develop their life dramas.
Possible Future Action:
- When the group is stronger state the ground-rules clearly that I am prepared to live-or-die for and invite challenge?
- Be less patient with repetitive deflective behaviour that appears to be getting no where?
- Challenge the resistance's?"

The above describes the base-line from whence the community began. In the interests of openness this account was circulated and discussed on our next meeting, and subsequently verified as resonant with the experience of others. Hopefully, from my description you can begin to appreciate the emotionally expressive nature of this company, with its encounter-like 'tell it like it is' character and competitive 'I want to be a star' culture.

Interestingly, the above description, in terms of Critchley and Casey's (1989) organisational categorisation equates with that of the 'hysterical organisation' interrupted between sensation and awareness:

> *"Organisations stuck here are in sharp contrast to the suppressed organisation - instead of denying feelings, these organisations go overboard with their feelings and much of their time is taken up with experiencing and expressing sensation. Where they fail is in extracting any sort of sense from this welter of sensation – they have plenty of excitement but they do not know what it means for the organisation's health (...) Many such organisations get stuck because by and large they enjoy the experience of sensation" (p 6 Critchley & Casey 1989).*

Another feature essential for an understanding of this company is the emotional dependence individuals felt towards the Chairman.

The Chairman, having originally drawn the working community together retained an immense personal following because of his earlier facilitative role. Indeed, Heelas (1987) in the 1980's had compared the company to a cult, and even now, the Chairman took very seriously indeed his obligation to provide individuals with unsolicited developmental experiences. For instance, he would often advance or demote people depending on his whim. But as with all intimate relationships a large degree of transference proliferated. Sometimes he became so trapped within the parental role that he enacted with gusto a 'beneficent parent' one minute and a 'punitive parent' the next. So personally felt were the dynamics that neutrality was rarely in the equation. He was either loved or rejected – or loving and rejecting – by turns. No doubt this was as exhausting for him as it was for others, yet, on the plus side, this intense emotional climate was generally felt by all involved to be generative of a good deal of interesting drama. The company was his stage and he commanded the leading role.

In regard to the company's earlier history and cult-like nature, it is illuminating to read a participant's account of the start to his 'usual' working day in his subsequent master's dissertation, where he observes that a Zilgeon gong – the large sort found in orchestras was sounded by each person prior to each mornings 'cleaning ritual':

> "Some people just hit it others make it reverberate and the sound just grows and grows like rolling thunder.
> We now begin the ritual of cleaning. For the next ten minutes we will silently clean our work area and any other part of the building we are allocated. Everyone has their own spray can of Pledge and a J cloth. (...) The idea here is that we experience creating our own space. (...) This cleaning is like all the showy effort you see in a theatre to prepare for the performance, which is not a bad analogy because during the day it is a show" (Pollecoff 1998 p56).

Following the cessation of cleaning, again sounded by the gong, a countdown to the working day was enacted:

> "Over the years the countdowns have grown more elaborate. And the movements you make whilst singing grow more complex, as a step or facial expression is added. Although there are favourites and stalwarts like `Match of the Day' or `Hawaii Five O' (Book him Danno') they change by the day. Today is the `Flintstone's Countdown'.
> `Phoners - meet the phoners
> They're a modern working family
> When your - with the phoners
> You'll go down in history.
> Do Da Dada Da Dada Da
> Da Da Da Da Dada Do
> (Everyone does a twist, during this bit)
> (...) Ten Nine, Eight, Seven, Six, Five, Four, Three, Two, One..." (Pollecoffe 1998 pp 57-58).

The above gives further support to the notion that this was a dramatic histrionic company. In this light, systemically, what the University offered in terms of emotional containment and reflectivity the company obviously needed, and what the company displayed in terms of emotional expression and creativity – possibly the University needed? But then what organisations 'need' and what they 'want' is rarely the same thing.

Feeling the Heat of the Dragon's Breath - Commercial Threats to Community Learning

Two months into the programme when academia and commerce had grown more accustomed to each other, a period of stability ensued. But then, everything has its seasons. Some eight months into the programme a number of interesting challenges arose:

Event 1): A doctorate student acting as a bridge tutor between the University and organisation accepted a lucrative full-time position to spread peer learning throughout the company at large. *(Having a commercial background she had been least resistive to an academic-commercial partnership, and had been my closest tutorial ally during the programme's gestation. Though she would still service the MSc, she was now more 'company than 'University').*

Event 2): The Chairman who had invited me in sold the company and up and left. *(The retirement of the Chairman, evoked within the company a response not unlike that of a trusted parent deserting his family; emotional distress on all sides was deep and long-lived, with individuals swinging between adoring and rejecting, gratitude for the past and fear of the future).*

Event 3): The author was invited to heal the organisation following the Chairman's departure. *(This took the form of communally working through the waves of shock and grief that occasioned the Chairman's leaving, and although offering rich insight into the company's culture, re-surfaced issues of inclusion and exclusion in the tutorial team).*

The organisational field now began to actively threaten the learning community. A few weeks following the Chairman's departure the author was invited into the centre of the peer community and heatedly quizzed about the nature of his relationship with him: "Are you still in contact with X?" "Do you report back to him about us?" etc. Though uncomfortable at the time, this regular surfacing, airing and resolution of hidden and imagined agendas helped to maintain community hygiene. X, the retiring Chairman had evolved a divisive culture where one group warred with another, while all the while he remained powerful and special. By contrast, within the masters teacher and student alike were seen as accountable to the peer-learning community and held to account. Indeed, community meetings under the influence of Gestalt, at this time intensified our experience and the transitional process in the Zen-like way:

*- **Accumulation**: In Zen this initial phase of creativity is seen to come to the fore as one follows an idea or vision that enables a build-up of energy, which in turn may be focused in a specific direction on a particular theme.*
*- **Saturation**: In the second phase immersion and absorption are seen to take over as interest grows and the theme is absorbed, to the degree that it takes over the whole of your attention. Indeed, in extreme cases you now dedicate your life and give it over freely to the chosen direction. One tries at this time to assimilate with the intellect, but the intellect is foiled and you are thrust into further immersion. Here there is saturation in creative vision, as intensity builds and no matter what, you still adhere to your vision.*
*- **Explosion**: The work now becomes a thing in itself, whole and complete, which has its own life and now uses you. In this context life simultaneously becomes a meditation and an art form of the integrated theme (After Boldt 1993 p 105-106).*

There were many Zen-like explosions. The peer community in this way constantly awakened, kept us in contact with our discomfort and forced us to change. The community's dynamic, akin to the company's, holographically appeared to mirror its

current impasse and growing destabilisation as management changes and a company take-over got under way. Finally pressures from the organisational field began to fragment communication and threaten the timely return of course assignments to the degree I circulated the following letter to participants:

> *"While I am accepting - and sympathetic to the fact - that commercial pressures and overseas postings make part-time study difficult, I interpret my role as Director of the external MSc as one where I am employed by you (my clients) and the conjoint partnership of the University and the commercial funding body to bring the MSc to a successful conclusion. (...) I am holding you to your contract with yourself, your company and myself, to meet the requirements of the MSc programme. (...) You may choose to feel alerted; supported; told-off; patronised or cared for. Whatever reaction and whatever you feel is fine, just as long as we open further dialogue."*

The above missive was received positively – bar one – as a supportive tutorial act. It also says masses about the anxieties myself and the tutor team entertained re commercial pressures swamping the academic boundaries; the fine balance between policing deadlines and maintaining personal support; plus the demands of an off-campus course that felt at great psychic as well as geographical distance.

Lessons from Drawing the Dragon's Teeth - So What Really Changed?

At the end of the taught component of the course, prior to engagement with the dissertation, an evaluation day was organised. The community decided to approach this evaluation in the manner of a collaborative action research inquiry (Lewin 1946) through recurring cycles of:

i) clarifying and planning - contemplating and raising awareness to the purposes and structure of inquiry;
ii) engaging and observing - experientially engaging, giving ourselves over to the energetic field while observing the processes of investigation;
iii) integrating and debriefing - meditating upon the value and meaning of the information raised.

This evaluation is reported at some length, as it is seen as seminal to the claims of this paper.

Upon the evaluation day I was commissioned to record events, to write up, and to duly circulate his account to the community. I also requested – and was granted – permission to publish what transpired. The following is constructed from verbatim field notes of the time.

In the check-in to the day participants begin sharing how they had changed:

> *"This experience has opened up an appreciation of the options"; "provided therapeutic*

insight and an intense working through of personal issues in a relatively short space of time"; "awakened me to 'being' as well as 'doing'".

In relation to the cult-like culture of the company it was also noted that the programme had:

"(...) encouraged life changes and de-construction of previous notions of the self" (...) "exerted a collective effect upon the organisation - by way of setting people free from their history"; "There have also been many major life changes such as marriage; babies being born; changes of employment's; movement out of the organisation – events that were less common previously".

In terms of learning, not only does awareness appear enhanced but there is tacit evidence for an emotional working through and a re-evaluation of self and relationships:

"(...) a healing process; I have become more softer, and questioning of what I'll do with the rest of my life"; "Clearer as to what is mine and what are other's processes that effect me"; (...) "Feel much more compassionate" (...) "I don't need to be angry and bullying; which I did to others as they did to me to avoid being controlled" (...) "I'm more angry and upset than before, as if it's peeled the layers off. My quality of energy is different now. More aware of organic rather than imposed change now".

Standing back from content to examine the developing relational dynamic, the process of moving from mundane physical and social levels of engagement, to more emotionally empowering and intuitive levels of communication (see **Figure 1**), paralleled a similar process to that of the workshop days.

Regarding the method of inquiry we will use, it is suggested we adopt a 'fishbowl' format. This necessitates a circle of six chairs being placed in the centre of the larger community group, of which participants fill five chairs but leave one empty. Should someone walk in another must leave, so as to keep an empty and inviting chair. Through this process speakers regularly alternate, only five people are active at any one time, others may enter and the whole community is party to discussion. With this holding structure in place attention now turned towards the healing effects of the learning community within the company:

"Emotions are more accessible now and our personal quality of life (within the organisation) has improved; for example, we can now say no". "This course has helped me integrate difficult experiences of the past (within the company), and helped me develop confidence." "Before the MSc I didn't feel qualified as a human being. So many years of negative feedback. I now value my humbleness and skill in working with people here."(...) "The course resonated with the healing and family-organisational therapy; feel more whole as a human being". "I've reinvented myself and my career on this course, and learnt the importance of beingness and being ourselves".

Bear in mind, as this company had once been compared to a cult (Helaas 1987), it was perhaps from this legacy individuals felt themselves freed? This aside, keeping the affective educational domain to the fore while building models and intellectual understanding appears to have permeated back into the workplace:

> "The self and peer assessment felt very rich, and is starting to be integrated into the organisation more now." "Peer groups are still meeting and have generated peer sets within the company". "Tutors as peers in one sense, but recognisable authorities in another - was well handled and provided a good role model".

There is perceived to be an immense difference in boundaries between business and education, to the degree a warning is proffered to all humanistic educators who wish to tend their wares in a commercial culture:

> "Boundaries in a business context are usually positive and un-negotiable. Educational ones were more humanistic and person-centred, and this may have given some people permission to break them." "There is also the difference between business being action driven and academia being reflective. Developing an attitude to work and life that is inquiry based was not easy with commercial pressures in your face".

Developing upon this theme by exploring how cynical business and organisational values infiltrated the learning community:

> "Trying to get away with it - fake it until you make it." "After all, we are good sales people who market things. Be, do, have - are all part of our culture." "Front, was part of our survival, and the articulation of needs was not strong here. The greater cause of work, always came before people and the group. We did not share needs for fear of looking stupid". "What is unique in this group, its earlier history of growing-up together through personal growth seminars, fed us with family stresses".

Later in the day we return again to how the educational community has affected organisational culture:

> "My doing and acting is now balanced by encouragement to reflect." "Greater sensitivity in the organisation towards people and their needs". "Changes to the company have been in our completing and working through the old culture, which enabled us to put a full stop to our previous conflicts". "Facilitated cultural change with the new company take-over and helped us re-create our culture". "We have re-committed to values we once held dear; such as person-centredness and growth".

Re the "hysterical culture" earlier described:

> "We have moved from a panicky culture to one more accepting of new people". (...) "the course kept us sane through a very organisationally traumatising time. The course helped to build-up our new culture." (...) "This group processed something

for the organisation, and took this back again resolved in part. The old way had reached the end of the road and the course gave the company a new direction. Look how the company has doubled in size since the MSc began!" (...) "We now have a new lease of life, structure and capability for sustaining people centred values that provide support and in turn influence our client relations. Increased skills means increased charge-out rates to clients".

In the final minutes participants share their appreciation of the inquiry process. What began as a rather mechanistic and intellectual task is observed to have transformed into a richly experiential, contemplative and flowing process, as is usually the case I note, when people are encouraged in a Gestalt container to be reflective 'human-beings' rather than over-busy 'human-doings'.

Taking this paper's earlier description of the community in its initial meeting (see the earlier section entitled 'Awakening Dragon's') as a base-line, there appears to be less dependence, less distress reaching out from the past, less competition – as the 'stars' now appear less in ascendance and the community is self-facilitating. I speculate that learners in a Gestalt informed peer-learning community, in feeling more seen, heard and cared for, have possibly less need to politically and emotionally act-out their distress.

Individually and on mass, the community personality has seemingly shifted from an over-concern with individual and competitive ego-survival to a more spiritual/transpersonal stance, as is evidenced in such comments as:

"I've become more softer and questioning of what I will do with the rest of my life"; "I now value my humbleness"; "feel more whole as a human being"; "I've reinvented myself...and learnt the importance of beingness and being ourselves"; "Feel much more compassionate"; "My doing and acting is now balanced by encouragement to reflect."

Organisationally, there seems also to have been many qualitative changes:

"Peer groups are still meeting and have generated peer sets within the company"; "Emotions are more accessible now and our personal quality of life (within the organisation) has improved"; "Greater sensitivity in the organisation towards people and their needs"; "Changes to the company have been in our completing and working through the old culture, which enabled us to put a full stop to our previous conflicts"; "Facilitated cultural change with the new company take-over and helped us re-create our culture"; "We are re-committed to person-centredness and growth".

Change - A Phoenix or a Death-Knell?

From the foregoing inquiry it would appear substantial gains were made in developing individuals in areas of self and spiritual awareness, via fostering higher level motivation and a greater sensitivity to others. The person-valuing culture of the learning community appears to have also supported individuals through the hiatus of a change of company

ownership and done much to heal trauma of the past, while simultaneously building individual resilience.

Reflecting upon the ability of a peer-learning community working in a Gestalt way to facilitate organisational change, it is suggested there was transfer of learning from the course community to the organisation, that individuals developed, and that the wider organisational culture was in part changed. Regarding the feasibility of a learning community – within the framework of a master's programme serving to promote personal and spiritual development, quality supervision and organisational renewal, participant feedback attests a degree of success in this regard.

A year post the masters all who participated in the programme had left the company. All bar one – who left in the first block – completed the taught component of the course to achieve a post-graduate diploma. Five sixths gained a master's, and two have sinced progressed to doctorate study, and all this from a cohort who were primarily without a first degree and came via a non-traditional route of academic entry.

Post the chairman's departure the company's original culture was obliterated as it doubled then trebled in size. As over-expansion plus a drive to replace 'the old' with `the new' led to redundancies, most course participants chose to work free-lance. So was this experiment an organisational phoenix or a death-knell? I guess the answer to this question depends upon whom you perceive to be the 'real client'. Was it the original organisation, the newly forming organisation, the Chairman, or the learning community? Personally, I believe it was the latter. Recent evidence from on-going conversations and an informal appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivasta 1987) conducted in a recent conference setting, suggests it challenged those personal and institutional patterns – remnants of the earlier cult culture that kept people stuck, and gave them the strength to leave their institutional home. Indeed, some set up successful companies and took many of their colleagues with them.

Change Agency - Some Reflections upon the Dragon Slayer's Role

So what have I learnt from this experience?

First, I have come to realise the truth of Gestalt's paradoxical nature of change, that it is better to raise awareness and to build-in community support than to aim to change something or somebody directly.

Second, I appreciate the wisdom of Stapley's (1996) observation that change agents have responsibility for 'relating to the emotional and cognitive state' of a client system, and should see themselves as parent-like, temporarily sustaining a holding environment wherein clients can be facilitated beyond unhelpful methods of thinking and behaving, and indeed supported while they deal with the anxiety and uncertainty that accompanies change. As a supportive container, a Gestalt informed peer-learning community seems to have performed this function excellently.

Third, I came to recognise that organisations make collective demands of the individual that infiltrate and subjugate them to a 'collective consciousness' which 'sucks them into the personality structure of the group', with the consequence that when the organisational field is threatened the individual also becomes threatened. From this perspective, a change agent romantically represents a St. George-like figure, a slayer of dragons, who struggles to release the organisation's grip on individual and to release his 'still small voice' and reflective wisdom. Gestalt influence was a powerful ally here.

Finally, I came to realise the importance of continually clarifying `contractual' and 'idealised' levels of communication within the community, while fostering a dialogue with the 'authentic level' (Greenson 1967) and the core truths of all concerned.

Epilogue - Towards a Transpersonal Model of Gestalt

Boud and Walker (1998) have drawn attention to the need for reflection to be supported by the cultural, social and political context. The learning community described in this paper represents a vehicle well suited to this purpose.

Many spiritual disciplines speak of three levels of influence: i) causal influences of the spirit and soul – *that are suggested to exist beyond time and space*; ii) subtle influences of ego, intellect and mind – *that are suggested to exist in time but not in space*; iii) physical influences of energy and matter – *that are suggested to exist both in time and in space*. Relating these three-fold influences to the levels of experiential engagement previously described in **Figure 1**, it requires but a reversal of the ordering of these orientations to illuminate a Gestalt inspired model of humankind's transpersonal and phenomenological territory – see **Figure 2**. Indeed, the author uses this model to inquire into the human condition and to complement Gestalt's proven potential to serve as a phenomenological research and educative tool (Barber 2003).

Looking wider afield, alienation and depersonalisation have for long been recognised to attend work (Merton 1968), organisational life (Herrick & Maccaby 1975; Barber 2002) and modern living (Josephson & Josephson 1972). The research-minded culture of a Gestalt informed community, in the author's experience, counters these negative influences while providing a fitting medium for the study and facilitation of those emergent creative influences that complexity and chaos theorists (Reason & Goodwin 1999) seek to address within organisational life.

At the last, if we are to leave our history behind as we enter the 21st Century and create organisations and teams fit for the human spirit, we will need to educate in a different way to how we do at present. The Gestalt informed peer-learning community described here points to an alternative approach to organisational learning and healing, and a tried and tested way at that!

> *"Contemporary society worships at the alter of functionalism. Concepts such as process, method, model and project have come to infiltrate our language and determine how we describe our relation to the world. The recovery of soul means*

the a rediscovery of Otherness; this would awaken again the sense of mystery, possibility and compassion. Stated philosophically, being could find expression in doing" (O'Donohue 1997, p179).

Figure 2

G E S T A L T   E X P L O R A T I O N S   O F   R E A L I T Y

C A U S A L   I N F L U E N C E S (Suggested to emanate from the Spirit & Soul)

***Our Transpersonal/Intuitive engagement** – Reality as intuitively guided*
       (Listening to the Void and Nourishing the Soul)

<u>Gestalt focus</u>: attending to intuitive and tacit influences which relate us to the universe and help us to hear its message; i.e. near-death experiences; visions and divine guidance.

***Our Imaginative/Projective engagement** – Reality as imagined and projected outwards*
       (Unpacking and Integrating the Shadow and Unconscious)

<u>Gestalt focus</u>: attending to those internal meanings and images we thrust out upon the world; the unknown and unknowable at work within us; life as a mirror or reflection of the inner self.

S U B T L E   I N F L U E N C E S (Suggested to emanate from Ego, Intellect & Mind)

***Our Emotional/Transferential engagement** - Reality as emotionally expressed/enacted*
     (Catching ourselves enacting a Drama or Recreating a Emotionalised Past)

<u>Gestalt focus</u>: attending to emotional patterns and prior learning at play now, i.e., family dynamics and memories that bind us to the past; when memories use us and take us over.

***Our Social/Cultural engagement** - Reality as taught and intellectually constructed*
       (Noticing how Attached to the `World as Taught' we are)

<u>Gestalt focus</u>: negotiating a self in relation to others; acquiring a role in the intellectually taught world maintained by language, culture, social norms and beliefs; society as self.

Our Physical/Sensory engagement - Reality as physically sensed and experienced
 (Observing how we physically support ourselves and explore our environment)

<u>Gestalt focus</u>: experiencing ourselves as a sensory being alive in a physical world; life as a series of sexual and survival instincts, impulses and needs; body as self.

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