

BECOMING A  
PRACTITIONER  
RESEARCHER

First published in 2006 by Middlesex University Press

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ISBN 1 904750 53 2

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from  
The British Library

Design by Helen Taylor

Printed and bound by...

Middlesex University Press  
North London Business Park  
Oakleigh Road South  
London N11 1QS

Tel: +44 (0)20 8411 5734; +44 (0)20 8411 4162

Fax: +44 (0)20 8411 5736

[www.mupress.co.uk](http://www.mupress.co.uk)

# BECOMING A PRACTITIONER RESEARCHER

A GESTALT APPROACH TO HOLISTIC INQUIRY

PAUL BARBER



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express appreciation to those who helped me become a practitioner-researcher: Professor Annie Altschul; Professor Ruth Schrock; John Heron; Dr. James Kilty; Professor Petruska Clarkson; Professor Malcolm Parlett; plus my cats Pi and Nyssia and Chen who taught me presence and patience.

To my fellow travellers upon masters and doctorate programmes and within the various courses, consultancies and groups it has been my privilege to facilitate.

To Dr Peter Critten for his interest, general midwifery and kind suggestions as to how to deliver this creation, plus Paul Jervis who had sufficient faith in me to publish this work.

Especially to my partner Anna Lai Fong who encouraged me to write and my son Marc who keeps my interest in moment-to-moment inquiry and the transpersonal vital and alive.

## I THACA

When setting out upon your way to Ithaca,

Wish always that your journey be long,

Full of adventure, full of discovery.

Of the Laestrygones and of the Cyclopes,

Of an irate Poseidon never be afraid;

Such things along your way you will not find,

As long as you keep your thoughts raised high,

As long as a rare excitement

Stirs your spirit and your body...

*Konstantinos P. Kavafis, Alexandria, Egypt 1911*

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*Your duty as a Gestalt informed practitioner-researcher  
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*Tai chi is zen is meditation is yoga is gestalt is  
awareness is tai chi is zen  
– and I have to put them all in a circle and  
start anywhere to know that...*

Stevens 1984 p.73

# Introduction



*pre-contact*

## i. Preamble – Researching Holistically and Experientially

This text is designed to help you ‘think’ and ‘act’ in the manner of a qualitative researcher and will attempt to brainstorm you with options and challenges in a Zen-like way towards fresh insight. Indeed, Zen, ‘holistic research’ and Gestalt all encourage you to expand and raise your awareness, attend to everything, dismiss nothing and to establish a robust and intimate dialogue with what is unfolding in their immediate environment – right now. In this way, similar to a student of Zen you will also be encouraged to bracket-off belief and disbelief, to cultivate an open mind and to experientially inquire into what is before you. But first, I offer you a working definition of ‘Gestalt’ as a researching method.

Gestalt – a German word meaning pattern or constellation – describes a phenomenological and whole-field approach that works primarily with direct perception and what a person is sensing, feeling and projecting out upon the world, rather than what they are thinking or interpreting. To this end a Gestalt-informed practitioner-researcher (someone who engages in inquiry as part of their professional role) cultivates an authentic relationship and accompanying dialogue through which to explore how an individual or community’s ‘awareness’ is being constellated in their immediate environment. Central to this process is a researcher’s ability to embody a genuine, interested and non-judgemental presence. Underpinning this approach are humanistic values (see 1.4) plus the suggestion that the people, experiences and the understandings we inquire into are co-created, self-regulating and best understood experientially. Indeed Woldt and Tolman (2005) have suggested that ‘if a picture is worth a thousand words – in Gestalt terms an experience is worth a thousand pictures’! In this context ‘raising awareness’ is both a research method and an educational outcome, and the researcher themselves are akin to data on a journey of discovery.

How you use the insights of this text remain entirely up to you but, presuming you want to perform hands-on practitioner-research at some time, it will be useful to carry through your reading a ‘focus of inquiry’. Granted, this will change once you enter ‘the research field’; nevertheless I encourage you to hold a general ‘research question’ in mind when you read. In this way, I hope the dialogue I build with you will provoke a dialogue between you and your practice.

As to how you might begin to inquire into your own practice once you’ve chosen an initial theme (say a desire to explore what your clients or colleagues ‘most value about the service you provide’), you might keep a reflective diary in which to pool observations – chunks of chronological observation alongside subsequent reflections from which you can perhaps later extrapolate appreciative statements. Following this initial sweep you

might choose to form a group to inquire into the ‘best experiences’ of those working with you. This book will help you understand the directions you can take when commencing practitioner-research such as this while alerting you to: ‘where’ and ‘on what’ to focus; the effect of your facilitation style; the developmental nature of groups; how to account for differing levels of influence; the authority of conscious and unconscious phenomena; the research methods available to support you. It will also provide models through which to shape the information you surface and, last but not least, will enable you to cultivate the mind-set of a practitioner-researcher.

I feel I cannot stress too strongly the need for you to describe the mental-set and the position you are starting out from, for changes to this will provide evidence of how the research field is impacting you. Bear in mind that research of quality investigates the method as much as the theme and, as the researcher is the most important inquiry tool in Gestalt-informed research, then ‘you’ become a subject worthy of research!

By way of practical encouragement, periodically throughout the text examples of entries within an on-going practitioner-research journal are provided in response to the reflections and questions raised. There are also mini case studies to illuminate salient points, plus three extended case studies designed to illuminate the real-life drama of being a researcher. To support you in your research process we also introduce the research-supervisor, someone who listens to your problems and helps craft solutions, coaches you in research and mirrors your wisdoms back to you. This is a qualitatively different person to that of the traditional academic supervisor who merely monitors standards and polices the research method.

As to its origins, this book grew out of some thirty years of inquiry as a group facilitator and organisational consultant; some twenty-five years preparing group facilitators and clinicians – notably upon an MSc in Change; some twenty years as a Gestalt-informed psychotherapist and coach; and some fifteen years teaching research on doctorate programmes. It is therefore a product of my own ongoing and continually evolving practitioner-research.

As a holistic stance to inquiry is taken in this text and Gestalt is used to service this aim, my Gestalt colleagues may feel I am ‘not Gestalt enough’! As I have long felt that Gestalt was too important an influence to restrict to therapy and have spent many years dovetailing its wisdoms to holistic education, organisational consultancy, group facilitation and personal development and coaching – I make no apologies for this. For me Gestalt is the fluid cement that holds everything else together.

In summary, this work argues that social inquiry needs to account for inner experience of life where intuition and symbolic meanings are given form, for it is suggested that fantasy and feelings are as strong – if not stronger –

determinants of behaviour and meaning then what is conceptualised and intellectually planned. Simply, it is proposed that to capture the complexity of individuals and groups, researchers need to: be aware of the whole holistic field; appreciate ‘what happens when it happens’ and ‘how’ it happens; incorporate sensory perceptions and imaginative visions; engage with the situation in an experiential, humanistic, vibrant and authentic way; and account for macro scales of society and micro influences of the person. So, are you up for this challenge?

## Reflections

To help you begin your research journey and dialogue with this text, you might consider writing up in a reflective journal the ‘ideas and feelings stimulated by this opening preamble’, as well as ‘what interests you’ and ‘what you would like to explore in your practice’. You might also consider issues and problems you think you will be encountering and addressing. As over the course of your reading it is very likely this initial picture will change, I suggest you date your entry and as your views change you return to up-date changes to this, your original perspective. Here is an example of the first entry in the journal of a practitioner-researcher whose journey of inquiry we will be sharing with you throughout this book. All you need to know is that the practitioner-researcher in question works in an academic institution and that following a suggested trigger for reflection, a research journal entry in response will appear in italics:

*(August) Having read this first preamble I’m beginning to suspect that Gestalt and holism might be about being open to all influences – NOW, plus creating a field within which to examine my own practice. I get a sense of a landscape that will be forever changing and populated by different issues and people, and of me ‘recording everything’, what I’m seeing and hearing as well as what I’m thinking and imagining for fear of missing something which becomes important later on in my study. At the moment my field of ‘inquiry’ encompasses a Department of Educational Studies and all who sail in her, and my ‘task’ – to increase awareness of all members of staff (which includes admin and support staff as well as academics) to what has been called ‘work-based-learning (something I’m initiating) but which I prefer to call ‘practitioner research’ and to document/describe and learn from the journey.*

## ii. Learning Intentions of this Work – Facilitating Growth and Development?

This text’s experiential approach to learning is designed to:

- Develop an appreciation of researching and learning as integral to living;
- Expand your interpersonal sensitivity, inquiry skills and personal awareness;
- Inspire you to reflect upon the laminated character of reality and the nature of truth;
- Identify facilitative strategies and inquiry tools for illumination of the human condition;
- Stimulate your powers of critical reflection, imagination, courage and curiosity;
- Illustrate a way of researching that enhances awareness and is educational for organisations, groups, the facilitator of inquiry and their subjects alike;
- Foster a dialogue between yourself, case study examples, models and methods that support a Gestalt-inspired holistic vision of inquiry;
- Illuminate a model of holistic inquiry that addresses multiple levels of reality inclusive of emotional and intuitive levels of experience which, though primarily focused on the present, describes a practitioner-researcher relationship that develops through time (see iv below).

## iii. Reading as Reflective Inquiry – This Text as Dialogical Research

This work is designed to be active rather than passive and partial rather than impartial. At various times I will ask you to reflect on what you are reading and to apply its insights to experiences of your own. As you read through the text it is hoped you will be ‘developed’ as much as educated to inquiry, and challenged towards consideration of how ‘*the personal*’ dances with ‘*the transpersonal*’ in holistic inquiry. Hopefully you will enter the fruit of these reflective exercises within your research journal focussed upon an inquiry that interests you.

In order to honour ‘direct experience’ and to enter a dialogue with you I have written this book in the first person, for fear that if I censored what I thought or felt, or disguised myself and my bias behind feigned objectivity, you might be lulled into accepting my opinion as if it were some kind of unquestionable truth. I wish to avoid this conspiracy and would far rather you spit out what I say than swallow it partly chewed and un-digested. Within the text you will also be invited to consider how a researcher’s perceptive style and beliefs about reality affect their inquiry.

You will be asked to explore for yourself how the quality of a hard edged '*I-It*' relationship focused on task and boundaries, an '*I-I*' relationship preoccupied with personal interpretation, and a Gestalt (see 1.2) informed '*I-Thou*' relationship respectful of self and others. Each solicit very different influences and data.

Primarily, as this text is written for a practitioner-researcher, i.e. someone who performs inquiry as part of their professional duties, this work is of value to teachers and trainers, therapists and counsellors, consultants and change agents, managers and trainers, nurses and social workers, indeed all who facilitate qualitative social inquiry as part of their job.

In the Gestalt vein this text adopts – where we retain a focus upon whatever phenomenon is unfolding – you will not be allowed to settle into any one position, but rather encouraged to stay in dialogue with each and every position, inclusive of physical, social, emotional, imagined and transpersonal phenomena.

Think 'structure' and you'll see structure. Think 'culture', and you'll see all kinds of cultural dimensions. Think 'politics' and you'll find politics. Think in terms of system patterns and loops, and you'll find a whole range of them.

*Morgan 1997 p.349*

In the final analysis, this text invites you to experiment, to explore and to form your own conclusions. In research and facilitative inquiry, as in life, the quality of the journey rather than the arrival is the most important thing.

Not knowing that one knows is best;  
Thinking that one knows when one does not know is sickness.  
Only when one becomes sick of this sickness can one be free from sickness.

*Tao Te Ching*

Indeed, I have found the cultivation of 'uncertainty' essential to my practice as a practitioner-researcher, whether I'm within the role of teacher, group facilitator, organisational consultant or therapist; for nothing kills my interest, de-energises my experience nor deadens my curiosity in others more than 'certainty' carried aloft by an ends-driven outcome!

#### iv. The Developmental Models of this Text – Capturing Flow and Depth

Throughout this work two perspectives interplay. The first plots the development of a practitioner-researcher's relational movement through time within four evolving phases:

- 1 **Orientation** (initial meeting): a client/collaborator/stakeholder-centred phase where the researcher and client [be this an individual, group or organisation] meet, sketch an initial relational contract, orientate to each other's world-view and emotional presence, and begin to form a working alliance;
- 2 **Identification** (planning): a problem-centred phase where the researcher and client identify problem areas and prospective strategies, refine the initial research contract, raise to awareness the purposes and tasks of inquiry and the nature of the researcher-client relationship they will engage;
- 3 **Exploration** (implementing): a strategy-centred phase where the researcher and client work together to implement the strategies they chose earlier, modify these in the light of feedback and decide the next and future steps the research might take;
- 4 **Resolution** (debriefing): a quality-centred phase where the researcher and client evaluate outcomes, review what sort of publication of findings and follow-up is necessary, and complete the present research contract while working towards a positive ending of their relationship.

This model was originally derived from a study of the therapeutic relationship (Peplau 1952) and refined through doctoral study (Barber 1990); it has been applied to facilitation in education (Barber 1996) and consultancy (Barber 1999), and constitutes a developmental and strategic map of the facilitative relationship a practitioner-researcher engages with their client/co-researchers. At various times two further phases may also be drawn into this frame, *Pre-engagement and Post-engagement*.

The second influential model of this text is a holistic one which maps multiple levels of influence. I have applied this model to many things: levels of experience and learning; modes of perception and making sense of the world; ways of perceiving and inquiring. It originally arose from doctoral study (Barber 1990) into the lens through which various therapies seemed to facilitate inquiry, which I distilled down to physical, social, emotional, imagined and intuitive levels of engagement wherein you employ:

- Observational and interpretive skills at the physical/sensory level to collect information so as to create a working hypothesis;
- Boundary setting and culture-building skills at the social/cultural level to enable collaborative inquiry and data born of genuine and authentic communication;
- Person sensitivity and empathy so as to appreciate the emotional/transference (biographical) level of experience;
- Imaginative insight and metaphor so as to raise awareness to the fantasised/projective (imagined) level so as to illuminate the effect of unconscious influence;

- Envisioning and intuition to speculate upon the unknown and unknowable influences at the transpersonal/spiritual level that may be facilitating you!

Although in reality the above influences run together, I have teased them out in this way so we might appreciate the facets of experience that contribute to our holistic reality. But be warned, in 'the real world' beyond our thoughts and senses there are no levels or developmental relational phases, merely energies waiting to be formed, as I hope the case studies illuminating this text will verify.

## Reflections

Now that you have a more detailed list of the 'learning intentions' of this work, when you reflect upon your own practice – what stands out for you, what excites you, what concerns arise and what reservations, if any, come to mind?

(August) Wow! My first thought is 'Am I up to all this?' but I am intrigued how I can adopt and be seen by others as adopting 'a Gestalt-inspired holistic vision of inquiry'. I guess my question is: how different is that from my approach to research now? I'm also a little scared that I'm being invited to 'change' in some subtle and as yet un-clarified way.

Having been introduced to the key themes of this book, what view do you have as to how the four phases or stages – orientation, identification, exploration, resolution – can be used as a frame-work for your own research.

August) I guess it helps me put a structure on what I am doing and could be linked with planning, so may use it when I come to write up my research proposition. In contrast to other research plans – the pace will be determined by the players, my stakeholders – we will evolve and change the plan together. I'm also aware of how the above levels go from the more mundane and observable 'physical level' to a more subtle and intuitive 'transpersonal level', and am intrigued with how I might capture such wide-ranging influences.

It would also be useful before moving on to the next chapter where you will be applying principles and techniques to your specific field of inquiry, for you to consider the co-researchers cum stakeholders you will be working with. It might help if you thought of all these people gathered in one room and imagined having a dialogue with them; you might record the results of this imaginary dialogue in your reflective-journal; i.e.:

(August) OK ...I now need to consider these questions in relation not to an abstract Department of Educational Studies, but particular individuals representing different departments and interests, as well as how I will gain support and sponsorship for my inquiry.

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