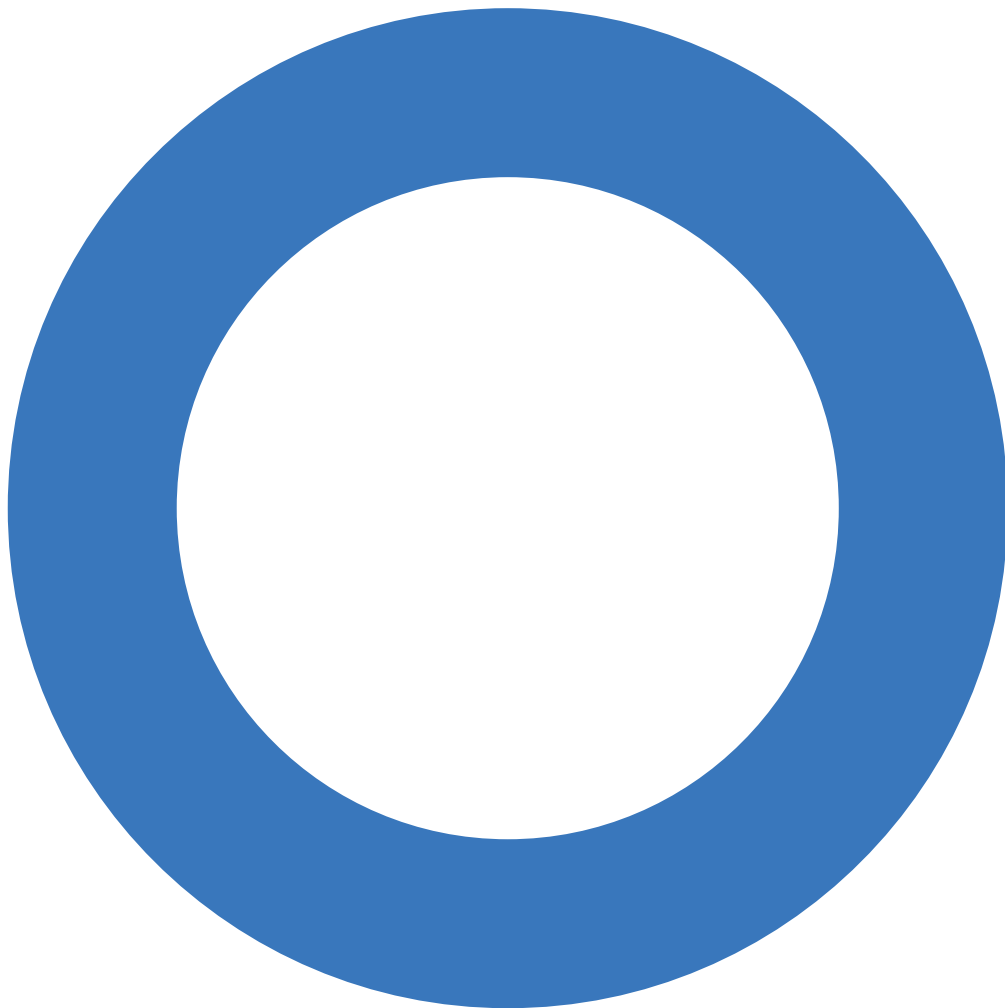


# **The Transition to Peer Learning: A Move from Participative and Experiential Learning to Peer Learning**



**oasis**

School of Human Relations

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## Preface

The author of this manual was the senior consultant and founder-director of the Oasis School of Human Relations, an organisation that specialises in innovative work, particularly in the field of transformative learning<sup>1</sup> using **peer learning** methods. Self and peer assessment transcends the more traditional approaches to learning and is an approach which has been used by Oasis since the early 1990s. This has enabled Oasis trainers and facilitators to gain unique experience and insight into this style of learning. Self and peer assessment is one of the underlying principles of all work undertaken by Oasis, whether with individuals, groups or organisations.

There is a growing interest in alternative models of teaching, learning and assessment. In part, this is due to the growing influence of some of the ideas that are outlined here: ideas that are beginning to make their mark upon the educational world, having been around for over twenty years. In part, the interest in these ideas arises out of more instrumental and more economic motives – to get more people through more programmes more ‘cost effectively’. This second group of influences is considerably at odds with the first.

These papers were written in the early 1990s to clarify the distinction between different kinds of learner involvement in the educational process. For anyone interested in examining the implications for classroom practice in making a move towards peer learning, many of the issues are highlighted in these papers.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Transformative Learning: a vision for the 21st century* by Edmund O’Sullivan (Zed Books, London, 1999) for further information and in-depth studies of this concept.



## Introduction

### The Educated Person

*Education*, as advocated here, will never be cheap. It is highly people intensive, or, to put it more elegantly, it will always require those involved to spend time together, to meet and to engage with one another and not simply absorb the subject matter. In this respect, and others, it is at odds with the prevailing ethos of our culture: a culture that prizes materialist ambitions and that views education as a commodity to consume and then be used to advance yourself in the economic race against those around you.

The ideas outlined here are based upon a more *collaborative and inquiry* based method of learning, where *how* the learning takes place is at least as important as *what* is learned, where education is seen as a civilising force and not only something for instrumental use. If that is true, then education needs to reflect some set of underlying values, not as external references and pious hopes, but as being enshrined within the very style, organisation and method of the learning itself. Inquiry is not something that has to await enrolling upon a Master's programme. Decisions about what and how to learn are not something to be reserved for Year 10 'options'; they are a potential part of all learning activities – if those involved are prepared to meet the challenges and difficulties that inevitably arise.

Similarly, if educated people are those who are able to make distinctions and give accounts of themselves over a range of questions and activities, then some substantial influence and involvement over the direction and the standards of the work they do should be a prerequisite. Elements of shared assessment about those aspects of the curriculum that are regarded as 'marginal' are a long way from the model of self and peer assessment that is proposed here. Continuous assessment is definitely not the same as *peer assessment* as it is outlined here.

In such a model there is considerable emphasis placed upon the need for *processing skills* of a high order – skills to manage the way things happen, the responses people have to what happens to them and ways of managing conflict resolution and difference, for example. This represents a considerable shift on the part of teachers.<sup>2</sup> Many simply do not have these skills, and may not wish to have them either. Whatever the reason, we are a long way from being able to implement a self-directed and, at the same time, collaborative way of learning in our educational establishments – and the world may not be ready either! However, these essays are arguing to that end and are concerned with some of the decisions that inevitably have to be faced in a move to embrace such a radical venture. This book is also looking beyond the participative to move into the level of co-operative inquiry.

### An Overview

The first essays in this section cover methodological concerns by comparing three styles of teaching and learning. Each of the styles is outlined to illustrate the implications to the learner, the material, the programme, assessment procedures and forms, and the process that necessarily unfolds and follows from adopting many of the stances. Teaching is ***the facilitating of learning that occurs through some form of managed or organised process***. The styles of attempting this are characterised as ***transactional*** (read traditional), ***interactive*** (read progressive) and ***participative*** (read radical).

A radical new paradigm is espoused for peer learning: an approach that brings with it a call to a more enlightened educational practice. It is a way of bringing theory and practice together in the person – in the person of the learner – so the learner becomes more able, not only to shape the world in which they live more adequately, but also to have more awareness of the forces that they are working with, against and for in the choices they make throughout their life.

There is a chorus of demands for ever shorter programmes, modularised and unitised, capable of being absorbed by distance learning methods and all of them accredited. However, such elements run counter to a real educational process – a process of inquiry, reflection, weighing and assessing, absorbing and evaluating views and opinions, making decisions in an aware and conscious way and with some sense of the longer-term implications of the position the learner has developed.

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<sup>2</sup>Throughout this book, 'teacher' refers to those people who are employed in traditional educational establishments, including schools, Colleges, Universities and Colleges of Further Education. 'Staff' describes people who initiate and/or facilitate participative or experiential programmes, which, of course, do not necessarily have an institutional base. describes people who initiate and/or facilitate participative or experiential programmes, which, of course, do not necessarily have an institutional base.

Such a view of education is at odds with the temper of the times yet in most forms of human relations activities it has never been more important.

More and more people find themselves falling back upon fewer and fewer certainties to guide them in their workplace, their home lives, their social circle and the way in which they manage themselves in our fast changing society. The appeal of the easy answer, reducing the complexities of situations to a narrow skill-based approach, ('learn how to be assertive' in five sessions, for example) whilst nevertheless offering something valuable in the short-term and in the immediate, does not help to address the underlying issues that create the need for such programmes in the first place. It doesn't, in short, put the learner at the centre of the enterprise.

The second section focuses on the implications for assessment and accreditation within the concept of peer learning. Self-assessment procedures and accreditation procedures are an important aspect of validating the efforts of any peer learning endeavour. There is much wider scope for those in human relations based occupations to have at least some further involvement in drawing up and participating in more participative and engaged forms of assessment. Not only is the process of self and peer assessment a developmental one in its own right, but it also reinvigorates practice and makes for a more open and acceptable form of working arrangement. This is often contrary to the reality in the contemporary educational world.

The last section is related to the field of human relations work but relevant to many other practice-based endeavours. It describes and highlights how the helping world is turning more and more to externally imposed forces, authoritarian models and professionalism and away from the radical impulse of its source, at the same time as other professions are moving away from this mode of operating. The dilemmas this raises for both conventional practitioners and those from a peer learning community are also explored.

After this tour of the peer learning world what is to be the result? Hopefully, a deeper regard for the potential of introducing more realistic and more adventurous forms of peer models of learning; a stronger recognition on behalf of the reader that educational practices reflect and reproduce the nature of the relationships between the citizen and the state, the individual and society; that the way education occurs is an implicit and very pervasive model of how many other things get done. What freedom we are encouraged to take on behalf of our own learning, how we are to manage the uncertainties of planning our own learning process, how we are to collaborate with others in a similar endeavour are things that have long left all but the most adventurous of classrooms – usually in the primary school – in favour of the more instrumental task of equipping young people to take up a place in the society that awaits.

Peer learning methods must have a future, not because the author wishes it, but simply because it is only in peers meeting, collaborating and exploring together that will yield useful answers to many pressing social problems. In the field of research, qualitative methods and participative approaches are increasingly undertaken. More and more individuals are expecting to be consulted and involved in decisions that affect their lives. A peer approach to learning is a hugely useful way of enabling individuals to begin to manage some of the complexities, the ambiguities and ambivalences that inevitably arise when individuals are pursuing a variety of contending directions. Increasingly, groups, teams and gatherings of folk will have to work out their priorities together and will have to learn how to integrate needs, share time and arrange useful ways of working things out.

## Section One: Peer Learning

“Beware the man who works hard to learn something,  
learns it and finds himself no wiser than before.

He is full of murderous resentment for those who are ignorant,  
without having come by their ignorance the hard way.” (Anonymous)





## Chapter 1: Communication and Learning

*“What did you learn in school today, dear little boy of mine?” (Tom Paxton)*

### Communication and Relationship

*Communication depends upon the establishment of some kind of relationship between those involved.*

All of us are engaged in acts of communication throughout our daily lives. All communication is concerned with getting a message from one place to another as clearly and unambiguously as possible: it involves a sender and a receiver. It is largely our skills as communicators that distinguish us from other creatures and without opportunities to engage in communication with those around us, we become isolated and our psychological health begins to suffer. It is no accident that solitary confinement, being deprived of all opportunities to communicate, is regarded as amongst the most serious punishments. There are many definitions and explanations of the process of communication, each one focusing attention upon particular aspects of the wide range of elements that form part of even the simplest act of speech.

We communicate in educational and training activities through the use of a wide variety of techniques: lecture, audio-visual aids of one kind or another, group discussion and through non-verbal behaviour. We also bring with us our own unique personal style, which combines elements of verbal and non-verbal behaviour, favoured approaches and preferred ways of relating to individuals and to groups.

It is possible to extend and develop competence in the field of techniques, through observation, practice and training in approaches with which we are less familiar or lack confidence in using. Developing and changing our own personal style, however, is a much more threatening prospect, and even more difficult to accomplish. Developing or extending our individual style requires us to be prepared to look at the reactions that our behaviour provokes in others, to be open to interpreting the cues and clues provided by the individual learner or the group as they respond to what we offer.

The level of the relationship may vary from the superficial, all the way to a close, personal relationship, but in order for communication to be successful at all, both sender and receiver must acknowledge *each exists for the other in some important way*. This is true for the teaching and learning relationship just as it is for any other; communication is the vital element in the teaching and learning process. Not only is it important to think of and to find ways to assess how well a message or presentation is being delivered, but it is equally important to think of and find ways to assess how satisfactorily the message is being received and how appropriately it met the needs of those who received it. For our purposes, we can distinguish three main communication styles:

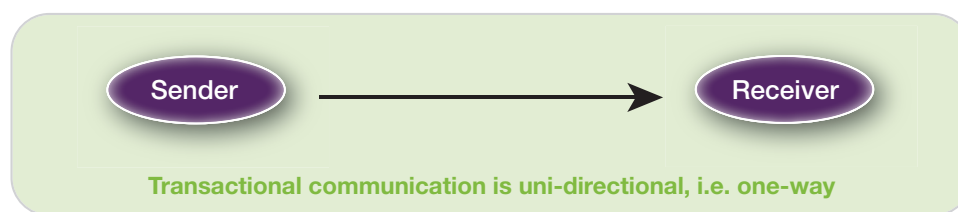
- Transactional
- Interactive
- Participative.

### Transactional Communication

The transactional model of communication is the most familiar way of approaching an understanding of the exchanges that take place in learning. In such a model the teacher, or sender, stands in the relationship of expert to the receiver. The message, like an exchange between a customer and an assistant, is essentially a ‘transaction’ in which little personal involvement or personal engagement is necessary. The ‘sender’ is in the position of one who knows, whilst the ‘receiver’ is regarded as one that needs to know. The act of communication in this model is seen largely in terms of the effective transmission of information from one place to another. One assumption in such a model is that the message sent will be the same as that which the receiver obtains, senders, therefore, often overlook the variables which may interfere with, or impede, the receiver getting the intended message. Senders may have real difficulty in getting their messages across.

In the transactional model, the sender is essentially in the dark about the needs, concerns, values and feelings of the receiver. This is not the same thing as saying they are indifferent to such needs and values but more that content becomes almost exclusively the focus of concern, and disruptions and interferences of a general kind are the only things that gain attention. Individual difficulties are often not spotted until well along the way and it is actually questionable how far individual difficulties can be attended to in a traditional model.

The transactional approach is sometimes known as 'the mouth and ears' view of communication. It is a model based upon a one-way flow of traffic from sender to receiver. It is a static and relatively mechanistic view of the teaching and learning relationship, which regards communication as separate, isolated, bits of behaviour which, when added together, make a complete frame. The responsibility for understanding these *frames* is left to the receiver. They are expected to make the major effort to correct any gaps in knowledge or understanding. The transactional view leads to a concentration upon influencing overt behaviour and fulfilling course specifications. Content becomes the measure of all things, or very nearly. It is not that the atmosphere and climate is irrelevant to the transactional model, but it receives precious little attention.



Progress is checked against:

- Syllabus
- Curriculum
- External description of course content.

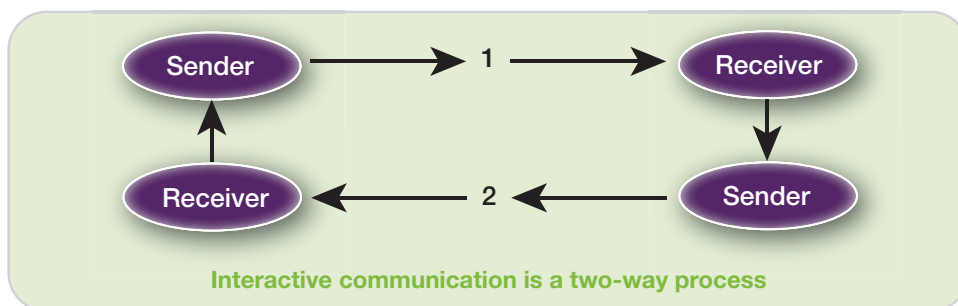
The learning of a traditional educational programme is centred on the demonstrated competence registered by a certain level of performance measured by external objective criteria. This can take the form of tests through examinations or simulated performances under special conditions such as in a driving test. A great deal of learning, however, takes place outside what is measured by such means. In some cases, the most valued learning has little relationship to what was examined or how the individual performed under test conditions. Learning of this kind is rarely considered; it is often acknowledged as 'incidental' or ancillary to what the course was ostensibly about.

### Interactive Communication

The interactive model stands midway between the transactional and participative styles of communication, and shares features of each. Essentially, the interactive approach recognises that effective communication involves the establishment of a good working relationship with a group or individual. The sender is involved in a form of partnership with the group or individual and if they are to satisfy their needs effectively, ways must be found to gain useful feedback so that the performance of both parties can be modified to best meet each other's needs. Such an approach requires a degree of openness and trust in the ability of the group to become involved in the learning enterprise and not simply to remain passive receivers of knowledge. Unlike the transactional model, the assumption that the message received is the one sent no longer holds. Failures of comprehension are not regarded as being the responsibility of those who 'missed' it and therefore up to them to find remedies. In an interactive model, both teacher and receiver share some form of mutual responsibility for the success of the enterprise.

A group can influence the rate and pace of learning and there can be discussion about the sequence and approaches that may be adopted to cover the course content. Similarly, learning outcomes will not always be determined in advance, or formulated by the teacher alone, or in isolation from the group itself. Whilst prescribed curriculum and content may be determined over much of the course, in an interactive approach areas of discussion are possible and contributions and influence by the group will be welcomed and encouraged, although they are not always followed.

This can create great ambiguity and even disappointment for those who wish to contribute and influence what happens when they are not always responded to in the way that they would like. Nevertheless, it represents a major shift from the implied assumptions of the transactional model to one in which receivers are recognised as being in some way collaborators in the learning enterprise.



Group assessment will be encouraged as an important source of evaluation, in addition to external tests. Progress will be measured against the group’s abilities as well as the course syllabus. The importance of working relationships with and between group members will be acknowledged as influencing, not only the rate at which the content can be offered, but also the rate at which learning can be absorbed. Role distance will tend to be narrower and self and role in the teacher will no longer be so separated. The willingness to be open to question and the sharing of personal views will be acceptable. Some measure of interest and focus upon the process of learning will be inevitable.

*The interactive model provides an opportunity for partial influence by the group and is probably as far as most institutions can go in becoming student centred.*<sup>3</sup>

Suddenly, ‘What did you learn?’ is a Pandora’s Box opening the way to choice, confusion and disorder. Where do we draw the line about what constitutes learning or what constitutes ‘relevant’ learning and who shall decide? The challenge of attempting to assess learning using an interactive style of teaching immediately becomes apparent:

- What shall we look at?
- How shall we decide what is important about it?
- How do we include other elements in the learning experience that may have been important contributors to its success, or failure?

Hidden from view is the dangerous question, ‘Suppose no-one else agrees with us as to what we decide is important?’ In other words, how much does it actually matter what we decide is important? In the end, participants and teachers still have to ‘play the game’ and take the exams. In the end, we all know that it is the teachers who have the power to really decide what we can and can’t do, so why do we bother with the enterprise at all?

*The difficulty with the interactive model is that it can seem to the teachers that they have moved some way towards involving the individual, yet they can know all too well that they are still limited in what they are able to influence.*

### Participative Communication

Participative communication extends the influence open to the learner beyond the limit suggested in the previous models. Participative learning views the teaching and learning experience as a *collaborative endeavour* between individuals who stand in a relative peer relationship to one another. They do not all share the same experience, background and knowledge, but they do share an equal right to respect and consideration, and have an equal right and responsibility to become involved in shaping the learning process upon which they are embarking.

<sup>3</sup>The traditional term for someone in a learning relationship is ‘student’; the traditional term for someone who is enabling them to learn is ‘teacher’, however, in adult learning atmospheres the dependency suggested by ‘student’ is challenged and we prefer the term ‘participant’, which illustrates the nature of the involvement of the individual in their own learning. Throughout the book wherever we refer to ‘participant’ it is an indication of participation, involvement and negotiation i.e. when the individual brings more of themselves to the experience, so the term ‘participant’ is far more fitting than student and this is the term we will usually be using.

Such learning and teaching follows a facilitation model in which the group and staff act as 'enablers' to facilitate the needs of the group, and is an approach that clearly demands high levels of openness, trust and willingness to take risks by all those involved. In its most extreme form, the group and staff share in the planning of everything and then, as in a peer learning community, the eventual outcomes of the learning process may well be largely unknown.

It is possible to work in a participative mode at several levels. At one level, participation can be of a cognitive nature, where people are invited simply to share their views on a particular topic, for example. At the other end of the spectrum, there is the experiential group, where each individual is fully involved in the learning process, open to experiences, contributing to the management of the group and its content, willing to share with the others in the group and to learn from the experiences. The *peer learning community*<sup>4</sup> is the most advanced form of this. As the degree of participation increases, so does the complexity of the group and the skills required for its management. Given the institutional constraints within which most teachers and groups are functioning, a fully participative approach is realistically impossible to achieve. However, there may be important areas of the course subject matter, organisation and style that can be opened up to collaboration in a strongly participative way.

Few trainers can be aware of how radical a position they are implicitly embracing when they describe themselves as working participatively and a good many may redefine themselves when they think through the implications of such practice. Indeed, most participative training is actually a version of the interactive approach that simply involves participants in active learning methods: participants often do not shape the content and method of the programme they undergo. Trainers need to be clear that they are actually using an interactive approach rather than a genuinely participative one.



Communication in the participative model has the following characteristics:

1. It is a series of unique and unrepeatable events. Any and all of these events contain the potential for influence and change of both participants and staff.
2. It is a collaborative endeavour, requiring a strong willingness to negotiate.
3. It is based upon a mutual regard and respect of peers.
4. Relationships are open and need to be worked with.
5. Conflicts of interest and controversy are regarded as healthy expressions and important aspects of the work.
6. The divisions between content and process are no longer so firmly maintained and kept as separate as in a transactional model.

The wider responsibilities that such a model requires mean that the facilitator will need to be able to demonstrate care and attention to individuals who need it. They must also be willing to risk being challenged and accept negative feedback without becoming vindictive or hostile.

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<sup>4</sup>See Chapter 4 The Peer Learning Community.

In short, the facilitator needs to permit genuine participation to take place and to be open to examining the extent and use of their own limits and power within the group. Such facilitators will necessarily be committed to making changes in their own personal development as issues arise and challenges are brought to them.

*An important conviction underlying participative education is that meanings are not simply transmitted from one individual to another, but they are literally created and used. We do not receive messages: we make them.*

The necessary increase in responsibility that individuals have to take in a participative programme ensures that learning is inevitable – though not all of it will be pleasant. Even those who leave, unable to meet the challenge, may find that they too have learned many things, some of which may take time to surface. Such learning can be extremely powerful because it engages the whole person.

Assessing learning in such programmes is difficult to accomplish by checklists and forced choice questions. It is often too personal for that and a checklist is likely to refer to the most visible, least important elements of the learning experience; after all, checklists are designed to measure everyone's abilities or skills. Participative learning enables people to begin to value their unique experience. Assessing how well an individual does against a norm is often irrelevant when enabling them to articulate the experience and understanding they have actively won following the risks taken in entering so fully into the enterprise.

Participative learning approaches the nature of a collaborative inquiry that encompasses four domains or qualities of reality. These are described by Torbert as:

“The outside world; one's own behaviour; one's own and others' thinking and feeling; the dynamics of human attention as it gains and loses, or changes focus and as it narrows or widens the number of qualities of which it is aware.” Torbert in Reason and Rowan, *Human Inquiry: A Sourcebook of New Paradigm Research*, p441, Wiley and Sons, 1981.

### **Problems in Teacher Led Communication**

Where teachers or facilitators offer a clear, leading role in a group discussion they can unconsciously become such a central focus that the responsiveness and communication which they were setting out to achieve is, in reality, stultified and kept in predictable and rather routine forms. Some of the problems that are encountered when teachers lead groups in these ways can be identified in the following:

- Individuals may passively consume what is offered
- Individuals can appear involved, but lack any real direct personal motivation since the trainer is always doing a great deal of the work
- The atmosphere can constrain individuals from asking obvious, but important, questions that would secure a good understanding
- Although feedback from the group may be invited it can be non-verbally discouraged by the trainer, thereby inhibiting the group's response
- Teacher-led groups usually become teacher-dominated groups, which then find it difficult to claim success for themselves
- Success tends to reflect upon the skills of the teacher rather than on the abilities of the learners
- Teacher-led groups can reduce the opportunities for individuals to develop personal responsibility for their own contribution and thereby detract from their own learning
- Insecurity in the teacher can create authoritarian and rigid frameworks making real learning difficult for learners
- The group may find legitimate ways of failing to accomplish what has been asked as a way of demonstrating their discontent
- The teacher can be set up to act as a 'fall guy' for the inadequacies of the group. Where boundaries are not clearly established, the way is left open for activities to be challenged and time to be lost.



## Chapter 2: Social and Political Implications of Communication Styles

### Paradigms and Possibilities

The three communication styles and their implications for learning and assessment, as described briefly in the previous chapter, represent points along a spectrum. Clearly any teacher or facilitator will move across and between styles as the occasion and the need arises; one approach is not regarded as being unquestionably superior to others in all circumstances. Each approach has merits and limitations according to circumstances, time, group needs, and so on. However, it is worth saying that the ability to use a wide range of styles is important, because it widens the choice available to the teacher or facilitator. While most of us are familiar with the effects of the reliance of the transactional style of teacher group communication, there are many barriers, organisational and personal, to overcome for anyone wishing to develop a participative style over a long period in a typical educational institution.

Each of the three modes of teaching, or facilitating, has wider implications than those found in the classroom. They reflect different conceptions of the learning process, the rights and responsibilities of those involved and the potential for involvement of everyone. They also reflect social and political frameworks that reach out from the classroom and into society itself. Individuals may choose one of the three styles out of what they believe are entirely pragmatic considerations, but the implicit teaching that goes with each of the three modes is enormous. The medium, in this sense, is the message. How far any individual teacher or facilitator moves in one direction or another is more than an indication of what fits a particular group on a given day: it is the point at which a whole range of assumptions about practice and theory come together and not simply about the subject matter under study.

The transactional or traditional view of the role of educator has clarity, security and stability. It represents a view of the world that has largely disappeared, but it still has influence upon the ways in which individuals and groups are provided with opportunities to learn. The interactive, or progressive, model attempts to recognise the shifts and changes taking place and to incorporate them within its style of practice. In so far as it manages the tensions, it will provide a model of living with uncertainty and ambivalence. In so far as those who offer it are at odds with it and wish to return to the stability of former times, it may end up being little more than an exercise in cynical 'invitations' or agonised attempts to please the group.

The participative model is unlikely to exist within most educational institutions, at least in the foreseeable future, though there are some interesting attempts to push the interactive paradigm to its limits on some courses. It is here that we have the extreme separation of powers and the most open system of collaboration without reference to external bodies and organisations as arbiters of what must take place in the learning or in the working out of things together.

### Knowledge and Discipline

In the traditional paradigm, the teacher reflects the social organisation not only of knowledge but also of society itself. Knowledge is hierarchical. There are those who know and those who need to know. There are those who decide and those who obey. It derives largely from the nineteenth-century need to compete in the industrial world and have a work-force that could manage the tasks of an industrial society. The organisation of knowledge into a hierarchical system reflected the social order. The teacher is not only a font of knowledge, they are an arbiter of conduct; not only an inculcator of facts, but a servant of the state; not only a figure of intellectual respect, but a person of substantial power; not only someone who has acquired a position, but someone who ensures others know theirs. There is the belief that the teacher defines the standards of conduct in the classroom, however, actually they don't, they merely impose those that are generally agreed will be the norm. It is a model that reflects a set of agreed certainties about how things should be and who should do what.

On the surface it all looks extremely tidy, well-ordered and well-thought out. In practice, as we all know, it is less than that. The teacher in such a model is the servant of the ruling elite, whose real task is not so much to inspire the masses with the flame of passion for knowledge as to ensure they know enough to take up their place in the economic order. The masses may be uneducated, but they are not ignorant: much common sense and social solidarity developed amongst working people alongside the state system of education. The self-help movement, the Mechanics Institutes and so on, all bear testimony that, alongside the hierarchical stable model of how education should take place, there was another living movement. This took a different view of education and the development and expression of interest in culture and technical knowledge.



### **Separation of Powers**

We live in a time when the view that accepts knowledge and power as interlinked elements is being broken. Most teachers themselves have passed through a system of higher education that has agonised over the role of the intellectual and the purpose of education in a changing world. Intellectual paralysis or impotence may be more and more the common result. It is commonly recognised that pursuing an intellectual discipline is now almost guaranteed to ensure that the individual emerges less and less certain of the moral order, or the social frameworks. Much research is supported either by powerful economic interests, which do not reflect a commitment to social, economic or environmental justice, and/or by individuals who develop interests that do not necessarily have any useful consequences for the community.

In this way individuals can become alienated from the very community that created the opportunities and that supports them in their studies. They become ungrounded in the concerns and issues of the community from which they came. The strong hope of those who looked to the new sciences of sociology and psychology to provide some direction and clarity in a world that had lost the certainties of the past has finally had to be abandoned. The answer will not be found there. These disciplines, too, are filled with scepticism about how to make decisions about what and how to apply their findings to an unstable and turbulent entity called 'society'.

### **The Collapse of an Agreed Order**

Teachers can no longer pose, even should they want to, as representatives of a shared moral order, an agreed social code. It does not exist and they know it. Yet some form of management has to exist for any learning worth the name to occur. For some, the need for a framework is sufficient for them to remain practitioners within the style of the old order, even though they may no longer believe in its efficacy: 'if there has to be some framework the old one is as good as any.' It stood them in good stead after all. For others, the conservatism of such a stance is not tenable and they seek to find a rationale out of the needs of the system itself.

An abdication of any willingness to look at the implications of the framework that is adopted means that the institution's needs are separated from the rest of the world and order will at least be imposed here. In practice, teachers in organisations that adopt such a view may appear little different from their traditional colleagues: they are likely to enforce the same kind of code and the same kind of standards. The difference, however, is great. In the first, it is about a nostalgic desire to retain some shreds from the past in the absence of any appearing from elsewhere; in the second, it is much more a pragmatic decision to run an organisation in a way that has some measure of efficiency. The school as a business has arrived and the managerial model is with us.

### **The Influence of the Context**

In the end, learning takes place via experience. However passive and internal the experience is, it still requires some experience to generate learning. It takes place within a context, a setting with a given meaning, such as a class in French GCSE, however it also has a personally construed meaning for each of the participants. In the GCSE level French class, there may be someone who wants to become a translator, someone who wants to write to a pen-friend, someone who needs French to get a place on another course and so on. The 'experience' they all receive from the teacher may be much the same, but the meaning each gives to that experience will vary according to each of their private agendas. What makes a 'good' lesson will therefore be something to do with how far the teacher's performance links to the private agenda of individual members. Being amusing may appeal to someone attending out of the leisure interest, but may become irritating and seen as time wasting to someone else who 'needs' to 'get' the exam.

The way individuals enter into the shared or institutional context, and how far they recognise the influence of their personally construed context will vary greatly and will affect the outcome of their experience enormously and ultimately what they decide they have learned. The traditional, or transactional, model of education obscures these questions by posing a simplistic view of the nature of the activity taking place. In viewing the learning processes as essentially an exchange from one party to another, it overlooks the influence of the process upon how the content is received and absorbed. It also removes from discussion any examination of the power and authority relationship between teacher and taught.

In fact, one should strictly speaking go further and say it does not even realise that it has removed such issues from the agenda because the overriding assumption is that they are of no account or significance. Traditional educational practice is born out of decisions implemented by the teachers on behalf of the state about what it should demand of its citizens and their children. We saw very clearly how 'political' an activity education is with the introduction of the National Curriculum. The state charges the local authority to provide an educational service; in turn they hire head teachers who select teachers to deliver the agreed curriculum in a manner prescribed. Whilst there may be more or less freedom of choice about how to do what, and even whether to do what, there is no doubt that this is a political process reflecting existing power relationships within our society.

### **Undermining the Educated Person**

An educated person, by almost universal agreement, has the ability to reason effectively, make judgements critically and act responsibly, in short to be 'self-directing'. How and at what point does an individual become self-directing, or responsible, in a process that has removed all the major decisions from their view, let alone from their control? The educated person is somehow to be the result of a process from which all serious opportunity to influence or affect what happens is not even an option: this is a major contradiction.

In traditional educational activities those who are charged with responsibility to teach, or pass on talents or knowledge, are regarded as both examples and exemplars of the 'educated person'. They, in turn, recruit into their own ranks those who meet the rigorous standards they establish, conferring as they do so the right to judge others in their turn. This is an oppressive system based upon the judgement of one select group to impose their will upon others who are not consulted in any serious way, and who have no right of redress about the essential inequality of the enterprise.

The structure of the framework is so well established that to question one of its basic propositions – the assumption of oppressive authority by one group over another – would appear to many people to call the whole enterprise into question. This is precisely what is intended here. If those receiving the education are unfit to judge what they need until they have had it, how does anyone know when they have had it whether it was what they needed? Their needs as individuals or as a group are ignored and the 'curriculum', or the 'course', is erected as the determinant of what is needed.

To make a 'good engineer', for example, we devise a syllabus that will take an average competent undergraduate at the end of a period of time and turn him (or her perhaps) into a good engineer. We produce English graduates by deciding what they ought to know, since they cannot be expected to know themselves. We then ensure they are exposed to such knowledge so as to gain the necessary competence and understanding to pass the relevant exams that will judge how well they have learned what we have taught! Whether we taught it well enough is not to be considered. The tests and the measures are heavily weighted in making judgements about the student's performance in isolation from our own. In primary school too, where freedoms are more extensive, the same essential process of socialisation is taking place. Young people, from the age of five, learn that their own experience and their own contribution to learning is, at best, not to be trusted and, at worst, irrelevant. The systematic invalidation of their own experience and the discounting of their own knowing that is a necessary by-product of the traditional system is all too clearly evident in our society.

### **The Dilemmas of the Interactive**

The implications for the interactive approach can surely be seen here. For many who adopt the interactive model, who wish to negotiate and manage their groups, there is every danger of turning to it out of nothing other than a pragmatic wish for some kind of order. If we cannot govern by dictat and by fear, by having the ultimate power to impose our will, as in the old order, then we had better cajole and sweeten our recalcitrant charges by asking them what they want.

The separation of powers has not gone so far as to create a split between knowledge and power, but has gone far enough for the old means to no longer hold. Negotiation and attempts to allow involvement in the marginal decisions that affect their lives is offered as a form of involvement and participation. It is hoped this will appease them and allow the enterprise to move along with some degree of efficiency.

Underlying the interactive model is the potential for simply fudging the issues. At its best it is far from that. It can be a brave attempt to work with the uncertainties of the role of the educator in a world without any agreed social or moral codes by which to abide. The anguish this may cause can be immense, both for the educator and those with whom they work. It may require them to walk a line about issue after issue when their students want direction and clarity. It may be, too, that they find themselves unable to go along with the reactionary response of some colleagues, who wish to draw back in frustration and out of annoyance at having to be so co-operative with those they serve. For many teachers, the interactive model seems to represent something little short of a capitulation to the peasantry by the aristocracy; the roles are reversed and they do not like it.

### **Knowledge is Power**

The contemporary belief that knowledge is power is perhaps coming to its own final days. Knowledge is only power in a world that recognises knowledge as a passport to the powerful positions in society, access to the levers of decision-making, entry to the corridors of power and so on. The democratisation of life, that took place throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, created a consensus which took for granted that social change could both proceed at a pace that was acceptable and incorporate into it those who were willing to educate themselves to gain access to the benefits. Parents of children born after the Second World War adopted the view that what they had been unable to have, their children would have. The increase in secondary education, the improvements of higher education and the development of the polytechnics were all, in one way or another, part of the agreed social contract that educational opportunities should be thrown open to all those who could benefit.

### **Education as a Commodity**

Along with that view went the corresponding view that with such benefits would come employment and a way of life to match – things that the parents themselves had never had. For a while that bargain looked as though it would hold out – until the 1970s. Some 30 years later we can see that model has all but collapsed. There may be more and more students in more and more institutions of higher and further education, but, for many, the link between education and prosperity has disappeared. Education is no longer the route to a safe career for many. The quality of the provision itself and the commitment of those providing it have gone through major upheaval and where entry to a University or a degree programme was once regarded as a great achievement, for many it is now almost a social expectation.

Education is now a commodity that is almost universally available and almost without utility for a great many people. Not because education per se is not worthwhile, but the kind that is offered, with the pretence of creating a more marketable individual at the end, is largely a waste. Genuine education is valuable to anyone who wants it at any time, but such provision as we are discussing here falls far short of this category.

### **The Radical Position**

There have never been times like this for the radical: times when they can 'put their money where their mouth is.' We stand at the edge of major social change, when the old ideas have lost force, when the attempts to adjust and make do show increasing signs of strain and collapse and when the world is waiting for what might emerge. This is a time of great difficulty for the radical.

It is far easier to proclaim views that have radical impact when there is little chance of them being listened to and even less chance of them being adopted. Now, there is the potential for new ideas to gain consideration and new ways of attempting things to be given a chance to prove themselves. In such a climate, the danger for the radical is all too clear: the chance to test out how far they live and believe the ideas they espoused so fervently at a time when there was little chance of being tested against them.

If the risk in the interactive approach is that it is seen as little more than muddle and compromise, it nevertheless moves along with attempts to build coalitions of agreement, in an effort to carry everyone along – to some workable degree at least. What takes place in the classroom and how the institution manages itself should not be too far apart. The boundaries of the institution are permeable to influence and change.

There is traffic between the institution and the wider world. The appeal of the traditional approach at such times is, paradoxically, its irrelevance to what is going on outside. A haven of security is maintained against all odds. Traditional values are fostered and upheld and the contemporary soup of social and moral indecision is allowed to bubble away. Traditional institutions know that there will always be enough people around who wish to buy the security, however illusory, that such an institution represents. But for the radical this is a difficult time.

The radical needs enough of a groundswell to support the call that is being made, but cannot wait forever or the call is no more than an echo of what everyone else already believes and knows. The radical is on the edge of the wave calling for new approaches and new methods to resolve dilemmas at a time when the old approach has lost momentum but has not collapsed. Too successful, and the radical can easily burn themselves out, and their ideas with it, by trying to move too far too fast. Taking on a hopeless situation in which to try out advanced ideas may mean a swift defeat, more from structural issues than anything to do with the ideas themselves. The failure to find a home that is welcoming enough to make true innovation possible is a real possibility for the radical impulse.

Behind the radical call is a differently conceived social order as well as a different kind of educational institution. The participative approach has as its underlying view the belief that individuals can collaborate together not only to learn, but also to work and to create a self-generating culture.



## Chapter 3: The Peer Principle

### Humanistic Influences

Most of the thoughts and ideas outlined here arise from the last 20 years of involvement with human relations work and personal growth groups. They are the beginnings of a framework that helps to give an indication of some of the essential elements that arise out of a peer learning approach, how such an approach can be applied to an organisation and the way we work with individuals, groups or organisations. If our intention is to promote *self-managed, reflective practice*, there is, along with it, the need to recognise that we have to find a balance between three strands or forces:

1. The promotion of individual potential.
2. The recognition of the importance of inter-dependent relations with others.
3. The need to have a positive regard and a care for the wider community, in which lies the safeguard against the mistakes and consequences that arise out of the distortions of individual perceptions and the dangers of collusion within 'private' relationships.

### Dilution and Terminology

With traditional educational organisations increasingly talking of 'learning contracts', 'self-assessment' and so on, it is imperative to be able to articulate the radical differences between true peer learning and the way in which this term is now frequently used. When no one spoke of these things, it mattered little because the potential participant would ask what was meant by terms they had never encountered before, but when the bank 'listens to you' and everyone claims to be 'person centred', what do such terms mean for us in the work we do?

When Carl Rogers<sup>5</sup> developed his approach, which he termed 'client-centred therapy', it was undoubtedly a radical suggestion that clearly marked it out from approaches that were traditionally in use. Those approaches were based on an expert model in which some licensed and accredited specialist assigned some label to the client that diagnosed their condition and provided the warrant for whatever intervention the specialist decided upon. Rogers overthrew this whole notion of 'medicalising' most of the difficulties that individuals suffer from and replaced it with the kinds of views he spent his life modelling.

He truly was person-centred in that he had the conviction that the client could make it (with the right kind of interest and attention), that the unfolding potential of the individual would ultimately flourish (given the right kind of conditions) and he embodied what it meant to be someone approaching what a 'person' might be. In other words, Rogers was someone who had done a lot of 'work on himself' and had explored his own process a great deal and over a long time. He didn't decide to be person-centred one fine day and then set about acting it; it grew out of his concerns, out of his experience and out of his attentiveness to his work.

When someone devises an approach that is essentially relationally based, like Rogers did, it becomes all too easy for those arriving later to believe they can take the guts out of the activity and train people in 'the skills' (as though the skills are somehow independent of the person using them), or think it is possible to identify the underlying belief system and help people to adopt it (in the belief that if you believe the right things then all will be well eventually), or even believe that it is Rogers' ideas that are 'right' (rather than interesting to explore and work with). Without a deep recognition of what Rogers' contribution was and how radical a challenge he posed, it becomes possible in his name and under his supposed warrant to propose almost any form of training process as 'person-centred'.

This kind of adoption of a term with little recognition of the underlying challenge it poses creates great anomalies. Person-centred approaches to counselling, for example, are almost *de rigueur* wherever you look. Combinations of person-centred and psychodynamic models are not at all uncommon, as though these two fundamentally different and, in my view, opposed approaches to what it is to be a human being can in some useful way be combined.

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<sup>5</sup>Carl Rogers was a notable pioneer in developing more egalitarian forms of learning in educational and helping work of all kinds. His work is a source of continuing relevance and inspiration.

Or is it that those who propose these marriages are doubtful of the one or the other and think that with a bit of each all will somehow be taken care of? A person-centred approach, if it is about anything at all, is surely about *presence*, but by attending and taking part in a programme in which the issue of presence is reduced to a set of skills it leaves the essence of the approach untouched. Individuals march forth with all the skills in the world but with little connection to their own process and no strong sense of how presence manifests; but they are classed as trained and accredited.

Because the term 'person-centred' is such a good one, the difficulty is that it is easy for it to become co-opted for many purposes and gain a currency a long way from its original intention. Many forms of practice talk about being patient-centred, customer-centred or client-centred, but they don't mean what Rogers meant – that there was an engaged relationship based on equality and respect, empathy and genuineness. Patient-centred, for example, is a novel skewing of the idea.

So long as people are seen as 'patients' they are within a medical model and however far you put the patient first, it is as a patient not a person. You are still locked into a positivist reductionist model of someone needing something from someone, rather than two people working something out together. Even counselling training programmes describing themselves as 'person-centred' may mean little more by it than that they offer an open-ended unstructured programme that is based on an appeal to Rogers' ideas, rather than a thorough grounding in the questions, 'How do you become a person?' and 'When you are a person, how do you become person-centred in your practice?' It can often mean that the programme in question draws strongly upon the legacy of Rogers' ideas but doesn't necessarily live out the values and ideals in practice in a way that would reflect his own attempts.

At one level, you can argue that any approach has to be open to modification by its successors and cannot hope to remain purist, but there is a point when the essence of the thing has been so diluted or overlooked that what you are left with is not even an imitation. How would Rogers have viewed the endeavours of the training organisations and accreditation bodies if he were around now? For his successors, it seems to bring a good deal of anxious heart-searching but then a willingness to accommodate.

The peer approach to work, whilst extremely person-centred, is certainly not a loosely structured gathering where emotional issues only get worked on if those present can be bothered. The way the true peer approach works in a programme is in no way similar to a programme where no initial contract is in operation concerning how far the enterprise is about engaging strenuously with our own and each other's process, or where working with the distress and inhibitions that are current in everyone, given our society and educational system, is not an essential aspect of the work. If there is no such contract and commitment, then however person-centred a programme is, it is not going to address the social and personal transformation that is what Rogers is about.

### **'Community' over 'Family'**

I regard the family as an institution that is continuously re-invented as an 'ideal' that is held before members of society, by whatever social elite holds the dominant ideology of the day. It is a means of enslaving people rather than freeing them. It is not family life that encourages individual freedom and creativity, but *community*, which has, as one of its prime functions, to guard the rights of the individual against the oppressive possibilities of the family to which they have to belong. About family we have no choice: over 'community', social contacts, groupings of colleagues, we have a great deal of choice.

I share little in common with those who wish to save the 'family', or who think that a return to 'family values' is anything more than an appealing slogan to distract people from some of the pressing social concerns that are, in part, a product of the breakdown of the very institution they so fervently claim they wish to renew. The 'family', as it is so often spoken about is, in any event, a relatively recent social creation, largely of the nineteenth century and a result of the dictates of the factory system. It developed as a means of organising the mass of the population into a social institution that served the economic interests of the dominant elite. The contemporary family served the needs of both the manufacturing and consuming aspects of the industrial revolution. It is because this system is itself breaking down that the family unit, as we know it, is also collapsing.

Conventional personal relationships reflect the contradictions and conflicts of the kind of consumer capitalist society that is helping ruin the world that we live in. The family is largely responsible for a good deal of that damage by being the economic unit of choice to ensure the maximum consumption of the goods that our economic system needs to shift in order to maintain the buoyant expectations and false sense of prosperity that surround us.

### **The Peer Principle**

The peer principle is, I believe, the foundation of all real human meeting. It is the essence of significant development. It is the basis of the recognition and value of human worth. It is the foundation of the human order where people meet as persons, relate as persons and act together as persons in relation – irrespective of whatever distinctions or differences they also have to acknowledge.

To be a true peer I must wear my expertise lightly and enter into the fullness of human meeting on each occasion. I must beware of arriving ‘knowing’ what is needed or required and remember that ‘we make our reality together’. To be sure, we each contribute something particular and distinctive; this is what makes it unique and unrepeatable. We must always remember that we cannot go back and do it again: it stands for all time. There is only this time and it is only this way, yet this is simply something to remember rather than be chained by. Each meeting is unique. However hard we try to make it the same; however much we make meeting a habit and our relationship a predictable pattern, if we are to meet as persons we have to be open to the unique, the particular, the uncertain and the unknown. This is an uncomfortable commitment.

### **The End of the Expert?**

The peer principle works at the heart of the issue of ‘professionalisation’ and the use of expertise to mystify and maintain a position of power ‘over’ the other rather than share power ‘with’. Working from a peer perspective, one would look to find ways to unlock power so expertise becomes a means of giving ‘power to’, of empowering.

The increasing professionalisation of the helping world (see *Section Three: Doxa*) comes at a time when many perceptive thinkers, particularly Donald Schon, have pointed out the restrictive nature of the way professional practice operates. In addition, much of contemporary social change is at odds with an expert-driven model of development since the spirit of the times is moving in an inexorable direction towards people working things out together, forms of increased participation and greater involvement.

The credentialisation of ‘work’, roles and tasks continues apace, and nowhere faster than in the helping world, yet it is a force that is deeply contradictory to the intent of helping itself. ‘Professionalisation’ is the term used to describe the process whereby some group, through training, accreditation and often statutory registration, makes claims to have acquired, or indeed does possess, special skills and expertise, which, in their extreme form, they are exclusively legitimated to practise on behalf of the rest of society. In such extreme cases only certain professionals can practise by law and only once they have been duly accredited.

In a changing world and a new era involving electronic communication, when knowledge is degraded more quickly than at any time in human history, the very idea that people can become ‘experts’ and maintain their elite status is a difficult one to propose intellectually. Economically and socially, it is seen as a way of maintaining the status quo. The arguments usually advanced for the justification of the exclusivity of professional expertise go hand in hand with the need to ensure that professional practice retains an aura of awe. Expertise is kept hidden and made mysterious. This is the process of ‘mystification’; making something appear more complex than it need be, as a way of shoring up your own need to be seen as different.

The continuing position of privilege enjoyed by professional elites can be regarded as a form of political oppression – in the sense that the basic human right to self-determination of others is excessively restricted by the monopoly to practice enjoyed by professionals. A highly professional society restricts entry to its professions, thus ensuring their scarcity is artificially perpetuated and therefore their position unassailable. It generates a highly competitive atmosphere for those places that are available and it links success within the profession to high economic rewards. It is, in short, socially divisive. It perpetuates its own monopoly position that is reinforced by economic inequality since it rewards those who become qualified in excess either of their contribution or their worth.



In a just society, of course, a professional would expect to earn little more than others, since to serve others is a privilege and not an opportunity to exploit their dependence by charging high fees, or maintaining a social exclusivity based on the manufactured scarcity of the supposed expertise. Hence the political case for de-professionalisation. A group that is interested in de-professionalising its status attempts to find ways to involve people in some aspects of its 'professional' expertise and sets out to take active steps to delegate authority, often to ancillary professionals. These ancillaries are recognised as capable of being able to do more than the traditional professional demarcations allow or admit.

No field is better suited than the helping world to be in the forefront of promoting the de-professionalisation and the demystification of the expert, yet it is making strenuous attempts to justify itself as a profession. There are all the barriers to entry and exclusivity that are the hallmarks of a group determined to hang on to what it has, as well as making claims to what it feels it should 'possess' to the detriment of others who might make a contribution. Moves towards 'de-professionalisation' do not have to mean a profession totally dismantling itself. It is about those with expertise remaining vigilant about how they may make use of that expertise, not to liberate others, but to ensure their continuing servitude.

As John Heron has said many times, it seems reasonable to suppose that the distribution of function, of specialist skills, will always be part of a rational ordering of society. 'De-professionalisation' means that the profession is willing and able to encourage and train people to be self-determining, to practise self-help in the more intellectually and technically accessible areas of professional practice. The profession, in other words, does not seek to create in the public redundant dependency; it seeks a healthy balance between, 'I'll do it for you' and, 'Do it yourself'. The educational system is a very clear example of all these contradictions. Knowledge and how it is acquired is as much about perpetuating a socially divisive society as it is about the acquisition of both knowledge and skills to enable the individual to make a contribution to their own life and those around them.

### **What 'I' Do, or the Risk of Expertise**

I am not defined by what I do: I am not 'what' I do. What I do may serve to create distance and promote the deference of the other. It may be used to aggrandise my 'self' and exploit the other (and this may well be legitimated by the norms of the wider society in which we meet). What 'I' do may be important in the service of the other, but it does not define how we relate together. It contributes, but is not, I contend, the vital element. Most professionals find such a statement not only distasteful but also 'wrong'. However, my experience indicates that this is so. It is more and more so the more 'we' want the world to be different, or the relationship to be different, or even the plumbing to work. Expertise is dangerous. It serves to provide a warrant for relationship being unnecessary, for the other to 'shape up' and do it the way we need them to because our expertise tells us that they would be better if they did.

Why is it, that if it is all so obvious to us, that *they* can't/won't see it? The answer, of course, betrays what we regard the nature of our companions on the planet to be truly about. If they are really stubborn, recalcitrant or downright stupid individuals, am I suggesting that there is a given percentage of humanity that is like this and I am somehow excluded? If I make the claim that they are temporarily deluded, am I justifying my claim that this is something that only extends to others and never to myself? If I regard it as an indication of the malevolence and deeply unhealthy nature of the human condition, then am I exempt from this statement? If I am not, then how am I to judge what to do?

Unless I accord the other the full dignity and worth that I would hope to find offered to myself, I am only able to cast around for some suitably plausible authoritarian justification for taking over the life of the other, in 'their best interests' of course and in order to give them the benefit of what I know they need. My expertise then becomes the warrant for my incorporating the other to my purposes – unless I am willing to enter into the fullness of relationship with them and attempt to create a partnership and a joint endeavour out of our meeting.

This is why my expertise is only a passport to another land and not a warrant to change the natives into my image of what is *good* for them. It is the foundation of my need to be accountable to the other about whatever they wish that relates to what we are doing together. This does not make the other the sovereign body and me the subject: it creates the foundation of accountability.

If you need my expertise and I am confident that I possess it, it makes no odds for me to explain how I intend to work, what I hope we will gain by doing this or that. I will not regard such a conversation (or the creation of a 'contract') as a waste of my time. I will relish it as an opportunity to speak about my practice with you in relation to the endeavour we are considering together. This takes a lot of time, but then relationships do.

## Relationship

The relationship is the source of the power, energy, healing or whatever you wish to call the agency by which someone changes with the help of another. This has little or nothing to do with the techniques, the knowledge, the training received or the ambitions and beliefs of the helper. Indeed, there is a lot of evidence, anecdotal but powerful nevertheless, to indicate these things can positively stand in the way of what I am talking about. It is in some ways a mystery, a transpersonal act.

Training, in the current climate, often sets out to discourage individuals from taking the risk of offering themselves with openness and recognition of their own vulnerability in such a way that the other is enabled. The tendency is to 'technicalise' help and to make it a matter of external verifiable standards approved by some external authority. This reliance upon some other external body approving the right of one person to help another is a strange contradiction. If you believe that people are self-determining, given the right kind of support and assistance, then surely those being 'trained' to be of help should experience how the process works. For one person to tell another that they are now ready (i.e. they are now 'trained') to help a third party become self-determining is a glaring contradiction that lies at the heart of the current helping world with its emphasis upon external authorities and licensing.

"I define 'helping' as supporting and enabling the well-being of another person. There is clearly something odd about turning human helping into a profession, with training, accreditation, status, case conferences and institutional politics. Does the wise flow of love from person to person require all this apparatus of paternalism?" John Heron, *Helping the Client*, p11, Sage, 1989.

Relationship is mysterious because it is unrepeatable and 'un-reproducible'. It exists only between those involved and only for as long as they remain blessed by the gift of the Holy Spirit. Let's be clear that this is what we are talking about. I do not think the Holy Spirit is a late-twentieth-century figure that appears in the guise of someone with a copy of the latest volume of *Counselling in Action* under his or her arm, accredited and approved by the British Association for Counselling (BAC). Neither does the Holy Spirit spring from some other spurious authority that has recently claimed the right to entitle itself to license others out of the field that they have now captured and are rapidly colonising. The Holy Spirit moves where it will, as it will, and when it enters it has no regard for the conventions of the day or the expectations of those present. If you are willing to open yourself to the power or the force of relationship, this is likely to pour through and ask all kinds of things of you that are not covered by the codes of conduct or the ethics of many professional bodies.

So, for example, I am willing to make house calls. I will work for little money and have sometimes worked for babysitting tokens. I will meet with people in unconventional set-ups and in what would be regarded as 'weird' situations. I do this out of curiosity, nosiness, and a willingness to see if relationship is possible and in order to find out if those who are attempting to work something out can benefit by my interest. This has sometimes meant discovering a painful conflict between my belief system and my experience.

Will I, for example, entertain working with folk from an industry of which I disapprove, or would I take up the position that they are already beyond the pale of my help? How far am I willing to contaminate the purity of my position by association with others of whom I might not approve? So far, I've had some very hard thinking to do and I've gone with the people and put my attitude aside. I have been rewarded each time and something of the ambiguity of their situation has been brought home to me that has reduced my judgements and enlarged both my understanding and compassion.

In real (that is alive) relationships, all parties change. There are no exceptions and no let-out clauses. It is rarely comfortable and can sometimes be a mess. It is a place where mistakes take place and they have to be faced. It is therefore important when entering a relationship that those who are with me know the terms and conditions under which we are meeting. Any misapprehension will cause resentment later. I know this to my cost.

Even with all my contracting skills, there are sometimes those who feel neglected or others who feel they have had a raw deal from me. Sometimes they are right. I just didn't have what it took to go the next step they wished of me. Sometimes I had been clear where I was and I wasn't ready to move another step and they didn't like it. All this means I really do believe that 'we are in it together' and 'make it together' and need to take up the responsibility of what we create together – the beauty and the misery.

### How Peer is Peer?

There is a continuum of involvement and participation within programmes: a two-day content-based programme on a specific topic does not have the same opportunities for involvement and peer-decision-making as a two-year open-ended experiential inquiry. The structure to hold a two-day programme together may give little room for any real peer work beyond the sharing that takes place in skills-based sessions. It may be little more than participative in what it asks by way of commitment from those involved. The structure may be very tight, the content in the hands of the facilitator and negotiation over the programme minimal. This doesn't violate the peer principle: it is a restricted version of peer learning and it is chosen on rationally understood grounds. These would go something like:

- A short event, with inexperienced participants meeting for the first time, is already laden with many concerns for most of the people entering any educational event without adding further uncertainty to it by making the whole thing openly negotiable
- Peer learning requires individuals to develop their experience of increased learner autonomy within clear boundaries
- This enables them to surface frustrations and tensions at a manageable level. This is far more productive and educational than immersing them in the full-blown anxieties of uncertainty that co-operative inquiry, for example, necessarily involves.

A great mistake, in my view, of much participative training and development is that it confuses participation with power sharing, and involvement with learner autonomy. It may make good sense to involve people in what they are learning but this is a long way from working within a peer-based model. Parents, for example, will involve their children in all kinds of learning experiences but there is no suggestion that they are in a peer relationship. Involvement with an activity to promote learning seems a useful approach, no matter what the underlying principles of the pedagogy.

In the same way, it is possible for a peer-based approach to be a good deal less than participative if it is an introductory programme for people beginning to work with the issues peer learning methods raise for the first time. All this is not to hide or evade the confusion and uncertainty that can enter the room at any time when people take up the offer to share their views: it is to promote the idea that we need to know how far we are inviting people to opt into the process, on what grounds and over what issues. People can contribute to:

- **Structure:** they can decide what is done when
- **Content:** they can decide what topics are covered
- **Process:** they can decide how far they engage in uncovering how the process unfolds.

Within each of these elements, the degree of involvement can vary:

1. Participants may contribute by deciding from within a given range of options – with facilitators holding the overall contract about the nature of the course, duration, etc. We could term this a '*limited negotiated learning contract*'.
2. Participants may be given a programme outline that forms the basis of what they design together with facilitator involvement in offering structuring and process involvement. We could term such a programme a '*facilitator-initiated highly collaborative peer approach*'.
3. Potential participants may be offered an invitation to explore the option of entering into something from a committed individual, who may or may not facilitate the initial process to get the thing underway or to find out if there is the degree of commitment required and the interpersonal skills necessary. We could term this an '*unstructured peer group*'.

### Interpersonal Skills

What is worth noting is that the more peer the invitation, the clearer the initial contract and the higher the level of interpersonal skills that will be required of those taking part. One reason why so many co-operative endeavours fail, in my view, is that though the aspirations of those involved are high, the ideals they espouse sincere, there is a belief that dealing with conflict is deeply at odds with how co-operative working 'should' happen. Most would-be co-operators have a deep unwillingness to recognise that conflict is a healthy and inevitable part of any group activity. Conflict is regarded as a sign of people being unhelpful, and scapegoating the awkward member, diluting real differences into collusive pretences and promoting phoney compromises are all too common. The group develops a two-tier reality: the one everyone pretends is operating and the one that actually runs the show.

The issue is not to stifle or outlaw conflict, but to promote it positively and learn how to manage it. The lack of interpersonal skill and personal awareness of how different individuals are 'triggered' at different points in the process of learning how to work together foils most endeavours that aim to involve people in co-operative ways. Facing conflict, for example, is far from easy since each of us has a great store of distress around being seen to be different, being put down and so on. All this is brought into the room whenever any participative endeavour is underway and especially so when it is a peer-based effort.

It is important to recognise that the desire to work from a peer model is no indication of ability and that for many the ability is considerably more arduous to learn than they had hoped. Many people explore peer methods and find them too extreme for their purposes. They may well question the way power works and how institutions operate, but when they work in a peer model of learning, the immense responsibility that it demands as a prerequisite for the enterprise to function may be too much. They may therefore continue to hold to their ideological views of what needs to change in institutions, but recognise that the peer process is not their chosen means. Such a view in the end may well lead individuals to facing some uncomfortable contradictions about whether it is possible to change anything in order to further the involvement of those taking part, if you are unwilling to learn how to take part yourself. You run the risk of finding yourself caught in the very dilemma you are setting out to overcome – unilateral authoritarian decision-making on behalf of those in need, less fortunate and so on.

### Diversity in Peer Stance

It is evident, therefore, that there is scope for great diversity in the degree to which participants are party to their own learning. The following table outline is a further way to illustrate the opportunities available. The more negotiation that takes place, the more peer the event will be, and it is possible for certain events to have peer elements within them. An A-Level group, for example, will have the content (the syllabus) imposed, yet the way this is achieved (the structure or method) may be negotiated. The most radical stance would be to have negotiation within the structure, content and process. The process element is the most radical of these and it is highly unlikely that there would be any negotiated aspect in our current education system, simply because it still imposes pre-arranged, non-negotiable assessment methods on all students.

	Negotiated	Discussed (Tell and Sell)	Imposed
Structure			
Content			
Process			

### Managing the Range of Issues

Even knowing the underlying basis of what is being facilitated and why still leaves ample room for participant misunderstandings, for individuals to get their emotional buttons pushed, or to get into embarrassing (so far as they are concerned) conflicts and differences with others. Interventions at a therapeutic level may well be called for.

This ability to move between content-based interventions and therapeutic ones is one of the most critical distinctions in the facilitator ambitious to work within a peer model. Enabling a participant to make connections between their personal process and some response that is an expression of an earlier reaction to something taking place now and -the encouragement to manage and facilitate emotional competence is a key skill. Knowing when to 'move on', when to 'move in', when to leave well alone and to have a rationale (whether it is required or sought is not important) is a critical feature of facilitator development. This is not to practice therapy by the 'back door', nor to make therapy an end in itself.

"I see the facilitator as an educationalist, not as a therapist – whatever the setting. The concept of education is thus extended to include such notions as personal development, interpersonal skills, working with feelings both expressively here and now and cathartically through regression work, transpersonal development, social action skills.

The concept of therapy maintains an arbitrary excessive and unreal distinction between the mental state of the helpee and that of the helper. I see human beings, by virtue of certain general features of the human condition, as vulnerable beings who are differentially distressed: some have manageable amounts of distress that coincide with the prevailing behavioural norms in the culture – but all require a mutually supportive *education for living* which shares skills in relating to feelings and other features of intra-psyche life, in relating to persons and social structures and situations, as well as skills in relating to data and information of all kinds, in relating to objects, things and the natural order. The heavily distressed and disoriented may require specialist remedial education, but to call this education rather than therapy provides a more honest, authentic and promising climate for change." John Heron, *Dimensions of Facilitator Style*, p2, University of Surrey, 1977.

## Chapter 4: The Peer Learning Community

### Peer Learning

The peer principle underlies the peer learning in a peer learning community and peer learning begins with an account of what makes an educated person – simply put it might go something like:

*An individual able to make aware choices; choices that include some degree of recognition for their implications upon self and others and takes these into account; someone self-motivated and not operating out of a slavish adherence to unexamined cultural or social norms; someone able to recognise areas of their own functioning that are distress influenced and who can take responsibility to attend to them using appropriate help.*

This is an ideal to be sure, but one that firmly sets the learner at the heart of the learning. It ensures the learning is in the hands of the learner and that the learner has a right to influence the learning that involves them. This is crucial because it requires much more than a person's intellectual capacity in order to learn. The peer method of learning will always recognise the affective as well as the cognitive component of any learning, and will be much more *attentive* to healing the patterns of interruption that influence individuals and inhibit them from being able to participate fully in the learning and its evolution.

A central tenet of peer learning in relation to 'practice' is that experience, skills, theory and practice itself are all elements that live within the developing practitioner, as reflected in the *self as instrument* concept. Practice-based activities, founded on demonstrable performance, are highly suited to participative and experiential methods and are preferable over instruction or discussion. (No-one learns to swim looking at diagrams on a board – though they may help improve one's stroke at some stage.)

Learning in the peer learning community is by its very nature, therefore, experiential. Everyone is expected to have commitment to, and active involvement in, all areas of the course including:

- Content
- Process
- Design
- Evaluation
- Accreditation.

The peer learning community operates outside any imposed authority; it operates with complete autonomy outside traditional educational constraints. What is at stake is the involvement of both facilitator and participant to decide together:

- Sequence
- Depth
- Ground rule
- Means of assessment
- Accreditation.

Such a common endeavour requires *whole person learning*. It is a holistic enterprise and is only successfully undertaken from a holistic perspective.

### Learning Contracts

If sharing in the educational opportunities they experience is to mean anything vital and real to those involved – particularly those who are entering into study after conventional school days are over – then some form of **learning contract** is a must. This will enable the individual to decide their own priorities within the programme they are choosing to attend.

An individual learning contract is the crucible where the major ingredients of any substantial educational enterprise come together:

- The programme
- The interests of the staff
- The interests of the learning group
- The intentions of the individual.

It is only when *all* parties are involved in making realistic decisions about their learning intentions for the duration of the course that there is the possibility of the whole process of learning having a different level of engagement and commitment. But it must be real and it must be managed.

For someone approaching a peer learning programme all of the following elements have to be addressed:

- How it arises
- How it evolves
- Responsibility of different people
- How it is given currency and credibility in the current situation.

### **Self as Instrument**

The idea that the helper is the 'instrument through which their help is offered', often termed the self as instrument concept, highlights that no amount of learning, theoretical understanding or 'knowledge' is any guarantee of being effective in relationship. 'Knowing about' something is not the same thing as being able to *do* it. This problem of what constitutes effective performance lies at the heart of many applied activities – none more so than human relations.

In the past, and its legacy is still with us, our culture largely defined an educated person in terms of their cultural mores, knowledge of the classical world and mastery of antique languages. These are marks of distinction that are primarily about status and class, and not about performance of meaningful work in the world. This is in stark contrast to the kind of 'education' that began with mass literacy programmes and the modern educational system that advanced throughout the nineteenth century. This was a form of education that had no greater purpose than to train workers to take up their stations in an industrial system. It is a system that has always had pretensions and claims to be offering a more uplifting view of the world, but the actuality of schooling, the organisation of schools, the administration and the curriculum are much more dominated by instrumental concerns than anything that could truly be called 'education'.

As a consequence, practical ability has been derided for centuries and academic knowledge has been set above any capability to practice. 'Knowing about' gives one the entitlement to 'expert' claims and the elevation of such expertise means practice lags behind theory. Theory is largely in the hands of people who do not practice and who, indeed, often dislike practice – sometimes quite intensely. The area of practice that we are talking about had few of these problems when it was a newly developing area of work; occupational disputes were unheard of, and claims to expertise were largely based on demonstrable competence.

The attempt to diminish the importance and ability to work with people and boost the importance of qualifications and credentials to practice will transform the enterprise into no more than another 'subject' to be studied. At the same time, it creates a deep difficulty for an organisation that lives out of its 'practice' and which wishes to bring theory and practice together in the form of inquiry-based learning.

### **A Counter-culture View**

This experiential, self as instrument concept is in sharp contrast to the deeply ingrained belief system that underpins so much of our social and economic life. This is the view that knowledge is everything that matters and that skills are something that can be 'tacked on', if at all. It is a view that has only recently come under modest challenge.

Most practice-based work sooner or later becomes academicised: even good practitioners are not as widely regarded as those who can talk about practice. There is a migration of interest away from the ‘swamp of practice’<sup>6</sup> for the high ground of theoretical research. What interests researchers is more important than the practice concerns of those working in ‘the swamp’; professionalisation, and all that goes with it, triumphs at the expense of the client. It continues, however, to be the dominant desire of those in practice to ape the well-established professions rather than create sound occupational frameworks.

The human service professions are not akin to mechanical engineering, quantity surveying or accountancy: psychological work isn’t objective and measurable in the same way that these other professions are. Values, beliefs and attitudes, as we all know, shape deeply how far things succeed or not between people – and are much more influential than the number of bodies a person might be accredited by. The dismissal of practice in favour of theory, of development over qualifications, ensures that those newly professionalising occupations like counselling are fast (with terrifying speed) becoming more remote from the concerns of those they serve.

### **The Peer Learning Community**

There are many ways in which learning can be offered and each approach will significantly and fundamentally affect the experience of the learner. There are six main styles of learning, which are given below in order of increasing involvement and responsibility for learning on the part of the learner:

1. Content based learning
2. Negotiated learning
3. Participative learning
4. Experiential learning
5. Peer learning
6. Membership of a co-operative inquiry.

The concept of the peer learning community is an integral part of the Advanced Diploma course, as it also is on other in-depth courses, run by Oasis. The evolution of the peer learning community, with the necessity for individuals to both manage their own process and contribute to the decision-making of the community as it goes about its tasks, is regarded as essential. It is recognised as an important forum for issues of illusion, collusion and even delusion to be challenged within individual perspectives, pairings and sub-groups and amongst the whole group.

The individual’s involvement with the peer learning community is a microcosm of the person in their wider community and participation enables the learning achieved to be set against wider issues. Practice and experience in influencing the balance of power, control and individual decision-making are indispensable aspects of programmes. Such an approach is widely applicable both to the conditions of the times in which we live in and the search for a more collaborative and engaged response. All the elements of transformative learning are encountered and present to be learned from within the peer learning community. Within this framework there are opportunities for:

- Giving and receiving feedback
- Meeting challenge
- Appropriate self-disclosure
- Identifying boundaries.

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<sup>6</sup> Donald Schon, *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*, Jossey Bass, San Francisco, 1987



## The Peer Learning Process

Issues of **choice, collaboration and personal visibility** are therefore built-in elements that all participants will inevitably face on a programme or event working within the peer learning model. From the outset, participants begin negotiating and collaborating over issues of content, management and the style and method used in the programme. These three important inter-related strands in the peer learning process therefore need emphasis and understanding.

**Visibility:** *peer learning depends upon individual participation* – participation in identifying and expressing one’s own learning needs, preferences for what is to be done when, what topics shall be covered, who will be worked with and so on. It puts a high level of commitment upon the individual participating to ‘show’ themselves to others in a way that is unfamiliar to many.

Individuals must first become visible to themselves through others. They must find what it is like to hold their own space, become recognised and acknowledged by their colleagues, as well as become willing to engage in and with the differences that are inevitably revealed.

The opening round – the coming together of the community – is an example of how a peer learning community can encourage visibility amongst its members. In this round, the individual has the opportunity to speak at whatever point they choose, say as much or as little as they like, reveal as much or as little of their own process consistent with the overall purpose of ‘getting here’, all with the clear understanding that they will not be challenged or opposed. It becomes a space of revelation and learning in its own right for a good many participants. Through the use of this space they begin to learn how to hold themselves before others in a way that is centred and grounded.

**Choice** is fundamental to a peer learning process. Individuals are making choices throughout a programme, about what, when, who. It is through the examination of choices and how they influence their opportunities that many participants begin to recognise that they only choose at a very rudimentary level. In short, it is a form of sub-autonomous choice. It is based on conventional notions of politeness, expectation and adaptation rather than on surfacing, expressing and negotiating the individual’s felt needs.

Choosing can be based on a deep recognition of individual needs and preferences, and can be held with an openness and willingness to revise choices in the light of the information that is revealed as others declare their choices. Choosing in this open and dynamic fashion can be a prolonged and existential activity that reveals all kinds of insecurities, fears and distresses. These are frequently based on past rejections, past avoidances and the consequences of having been willing to show oneself and being ‘put down’, or worse, in the past. Healing such misconceptions, correcting the view that such hurt is inevitable, challenging the notion that choice is somehow not an acceptable activity because their sensitivities might (indeed will) get awakened, is a major issue in the choice of skills groups and other working arrangements.

**Collaboration** inevitably depends upon the degree to which a person can manage working with the preconditions of *visibility* and *choice*. Unless a peer group actively seeks to examine its own life, it quickly, like any other group, develops recognised formations of pairings and sub-groupings. This results in foreshortening creativity and experimentation, reducing opportunities for group members to engage with each other and begins to replicate the features of group life in more traditional meetings.

If I am unwilling to make myself visible, will not work with my choices and leave it to others, then collaboration – the dynamic of engagement – is a sham. Collaboration is not the same as majority voting. Usually, the majority is only some cobbled together collusive assembly of un-worked out preferences that is motivated more by getting the process over with than by engaging with what results it will bring about.

Collaboration is arduous. It involves surfacing the implications of preferences, checking out the likely results of proposed arrangements, inviting people to reconsider (at the most fundamental level) whether their current position is indeed really expressing a choice.

All this is part of collaboration and peers can learn to engage with it strongly and with skill. Collaboration takes time but when people work strongly together, though they do not all get all their needs met all the time, they all know that their needs *have been recognised and taken into account in the process that is agreed, and a process is not agreed until it is agreed by all.*

It is this combination of visibility, choice and collaboration upon which the life of a peer learning group depends for the degree of challenge and learning that it achieves for its members.

### **The Role of the Facilitator**

Since few individuals have any direct experience of openly negotiating learning with peers and with facilitators, it is not unusual, at an early stage in a programme, for some individuals to become highly focused upon their own personal learning agendas at the expense of the agreed content of the programme. Alternatively, some individuals may begin to display distress-distorted reactions of concern at the apparent lack of clarity and structure of the enterprise. Sometimes these reactions lead to appeals for the staff to provide 'more structure' so that we can 'achieve' the course requirements. Learning to manage the displaced anxiety that peer learning inevitably provokes in the inexperienced – which is itself the more extreme the more advanced the programme – is a major skill of facilitators.

It is not useful to provide people thoroughly unfamiliar with the ramifications of the concept of peer learning with a total immersion in the process and leave them to work it out for themselves. This is a form of intellectual bankruptcy simply because they would not understand what they had gone through. If the aim is to educate people in how a peer learning community works then authentic recognition needs to be given that:

- There is something to learn
- Some people have some idea of this more than others
- There is a sharing in decision-making at a much more challenging level than is required by traditional education practice
- Each individual has to find ways to integrate their individual learning within the agreed constraints decided by the peer learning community.

It is the task of the facilitators to use their expertise to promote the strength of the peer learning group, to illuminate the process and to 'stage-manage' the various tasks so that individuals gain greater insight and more competence in how to manage:

- Themselves, the task and their contribution
- Their relationship to other group members
- The decision-making process.

Individuals are placing themselves in a particularly demanding position. They have to become wise to the issues, contribute to their evolution, understand and express their own needs, negotiate areas of the programme and learn about the content of the programme simultaneously. This is whole person learning and affective competence (emotional intelligence) of a high order.

### **Transformative Learning: A Radical Educational Paradigm**

Transformative learning is a radical, alternative, educational paradigm for enabling whole person learning. At a time when traditional understanding is breaking down in many fields of knowledge and inquiry, application and activity, transformative learning offers a new paradigm for the demands of the future. Learning how to participate in a learning community,<sup>7</sup> developing not only a better way of understanding the subject matter, but also of my 'self' and myself in relation to others and their relations with one another, creates a dynamic field of action that enables the learning achieved to be set continuously against the issues of the wider world.

Transformative learning draws upon a wide range of influences and seeks to explore the possibilities for change by challenging the rigidity in thinking and practice which so often acts as an obstacle to progress. If we are to create a way of learning and a way of developing that begins to meet the issues of the times in which we live, individuals not only need to 'know' more, they also need to have the potential for implementing that understanding in useful action in the world. A key belief is that:

*The individual carries within themselves the impulse to realise their own potential, to contribute to the development of those around them and to make a contribution to the life and quality of the groups to which they become attached.*

Transformative learning arises as a response to the increasing inter-relatedness of personal, social and wider planetary concerns that express themselves in a variety of ways at an individual, collective, and global level. Transformative learning is the name we have chosen to express the approach we take because it describes the two essential elements in all the activities in which we become engaged:

1. Development is possible in all situations and the potential for change requires those involved to engage with themselves, those around them and the circumstances.
2. To work in this way is essentially an educational activity. It raises questions of values, purpose, identity and commitment.

Human relations practitioners and even specialists may not see themselves as that. They may well undertake the responsibilities and duties as part of their overall role and see nothing special in it whatever. A considerable number of people, including social workers, teachers, health education workers, and many more, would not primarily think of themselves as human relations practitioners, yet human relations is at the core of their work even though it is not in their occupational title. Training has always been available but having human relations issues as the central focus is new. Human relations and transformative learning puts in what most professional training leaves out – issues of application and the management of consequences. The Oasis School of Human Relations specialises in change management and applications of human relations understandings to a wide range of organisations.

*Transformative learning is nothing less than the practice of freedom.*

### **Influences on Transformative Learning and Human Relations**

An individual's life journey is shaped by a wide range of influences that combine together to create the unique circumstances and challenges that bring about growth, development and the potential for surpassing our conditioned expectations. Individual experience is itself without meaning; only by, with and through others does the individual take form, acquire a sense of self and find the communion with others that creates the foundations for a secure individual identity. Time and place are the forces that create the environment within which the individual and their group, family, society and culture occur. They form the horizon that leads the individual onwards, or the limit that brings all exploration to an end.

The contributions of those with an educational or developmental role must increasingly recognise that it is not methods or techniques that are required to enable men and women to better influence the world in which they find themselves. We need to provide opportunities for people to understand how they make sense of their experience and to provide forms and frameworks for understanding that encourages meaning-making.

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<sup>7</sup> See *The Peer Principle*.

## Development and Knowledge

Transformative learning recognises that the individual creates from their experience those things of most value to themselves, but this does not give licence for individual predilections and fancies. Neither is the objective content disavowed or made nothing more than a stimulus for internal play without responsibility: rather, it is to be engaged with and internalised in personal ways.

In the end, all knowledge of this kind is personal: to be owned and then used. Knowledge is much more dynamic and alive than the simple accumulation of information; it is based upon interaction both with the world 'out there' and with the 'self'. Education is not a neutral process, but has social and political implications both in the way in which it is conducted and in the results to which it is put.

'New' knowledge is not something that replaces 'old' knowledge, it is always a development and an extension of past knowledge. 'Understanding' is a better term for this process: understanding grows in depth, in subtlety, and in richness without the understanding itself being experienced as different from what it was in the past.

The key elements of development include:

- Development arises out of the creative tension between the potential of the individual, group or organisation and its attempt to adapt to the circumstances in which it finds itself
- Identifying how the present lives out of the past is an essential step
- Only with a realistic reckoning of the contributions of all involved, can the conditions for development begin to flourish
- It is important to be aware that circumstances may be encouraging and benign, or challenging and hostile
- Within the concept of development is the need to recognise decline, decay, dying and death itself.

## Aspects of a Transformative Learning Approach

1. **It is peer-based:** adults coming together in free association.
2. **It is participative:** those taking part are involved, to a greater or lesser degree, in determining the structure, the form and the content of what is learned (consistent with the course programme).
3. **It is collaborative:** those involved share in decision-making over the issues that make up the programme.
4. **It is experiential** (wherever possible): those involved are actively engaged in winning the learning to be gained from the experiences that are designed to enable an area of content to be explored. Content and delivery are therefore integrated into a consistent and authentic balance.
5. **Theory and application** are vital elements in validating the learning and in ensuring that learning has a useful role in the world.
6. **There is a process of self and peer assessment** that is rigorously developed and practised as a principle means of learning about power, authority and submission in educational practice.
7. **The learner is seen as standing at the heart of their learning** and the one who takes *their* learning with them.
8. **A developmental view** is taken of the individual in their life journey, and the groups and organisations in which people find themselves. This vital aspect of transformative learning enables the facilitator of a transformative approach to moderate their contribution in the light of where people are, what needs they are able to express, and the destination to which they wish their learning to take them.

When you apply all these elements together you have *dialogue* – well, at least you depend upon dialogue for working out all the many implications that arise from such elements. In practice, all this means we want people to ask questions about:

- What they are doing
- How they are doing it
- And above, all why they are doing it.



## **Section Two: Assessment and Accreditation in the New Paradigm**



## Chapter 5: Assessment Issues in Peer Learning

Tao reading: *Defiance: Every god can be defied. No choice, no devotion.*

*There have been many rebels who have chosen to defy their gods.  
Without this option, there can be no true devotion to a holy concept.*

### Current Practice

Current practices of assessment reflect an oppressive, authoritarian educational system. Learners stand in an inferior and dependent position to those who teach, and those who teach are themselves servants of the curriculum designers, exam boards, and other agents that establish standards that are largely centred on intellectual performance and practical skilled demonstration. Anything more complex, such as Torbert's four qualities of reality (see *Chapter 1: Communication and Learning*), is unable to be contained within conventional assessment procedures or examinations.

Further contradictions in current practice lie in the problem of deciding at what point an individual or group is educated enough to have a say in what should happen to them. If you only become 'educated' after you have been educated (the vaccination theory) and if you can only contribute to the process once it is over, there is little to be gained in proposing the idea of an educated person in the first place. If the argument is made that the educated person can, at some later stage, contribute to their own learning, what and who decides where such a point lies? If individuals are grasping difficult subject matter they should also be able to make a useful contribution about how best that can be presented to them and be absorbed by them. This is a process that could begin at a relatively early age in many aspects of learning.

Educational practice and its assessment methods and procedures are almost exclusively centred upon measuring content objectives and their fulfilment. However, content objectives only form a portion of the experience individuals are likely to have, as we have already seen.

- There is knowing **what** to know: **content**
- There is knowing **how** to know: **method and process**
- There is knowing **that** I know: **assessment**.

Individuals can make contributions to all three elements of these processes. The more involved individuals become in each of these processes, the more they will begin to assume increased personal responsibility for their overall learning, i.e. act more like an educated person. The more they are inhibited from exercising influence upon each of these three activities and the less experience they have of working with the issues that are inevitably raised, the more dependent they will remain and the longer they will continue to hold doubts about their own judgements themselves. Not only will they continue to doubt their right to make judgements about aspects of learning, but they will also continue to have doubts about their right as individuals to influence the processes which shape their lives, not only in classrooms but elsewhere.

In a traditional curriculum, the first aspect is the focus of concern, i.e. knowing *what* to know. Teachers and students are engaged upon the quest of knowledge. How they do it and how it is measured are decided in other places, sometimes by the teachers, sometimes by the agencies, never by the students. Yet all three elements are required to make up a sound educational venture. If those taking part never have this revealed to them, they are denied vital information. If teachers never explore these issues, their assumptions will simply go unquestioned. The knowledge base may grow, but the power base upon which it is founded will continue to remain unquestioned and rigid.

Opening up the subject of study to involve an exploration and the examination of the processes of learning leaves teachers vulnerable to criticism of their own performance. Opening up methods of assessment to examination can also leave teachers challenged about their own judgements. Either of these outcomes is likely to be as unwelcome as it is unfamiliar to teachers and would require a personal, as well as professional, level of vulnerability that cuts across the background and training of most teachers and trainers.



### The Issue of Trust

Trust is the key issue. Can learners be trusted to be 'fair' or 'honest'? Can staff truly let groups decide their own criteria for an effective performance or level of skill? Won't they act irresponsibly? 'Have they got anything like the experience necessary?' It is true you cannot put a group of 20 year olds together, let them decide what makes a good nurse and then let them loose on a ward, but that is not what is being suggested.

Training that includes time spent with effective practitioners and which takes place over a realistic period of time would have many implications. It could lead students<sup>9</sup> and teachers together to determine effective standards of practice, discuss why such standards should be as they are, devise procedures that effectively test performance, rate such performance and complete the process to the satisfaction of the individuals in the group, the teachers involved and, ultimately, the consumer of the service that they may be providing.

Whilst such procedures are more time consuming than the simple transmission of purely cognitive information and the rate of absorption in such a way of learning is slower, the learning sticks; not only does it stick, it also travels to other situations because it respects individual contributions. It models the process in which people have to assume responsibility for themselves, to themselves, to each other and to the community they intend to serve. It enables them to operate more skilfully in life because it validates the process of collaborative effort and negotiated settlement.

To enter into such a process effectively, all must recognise a willingness to work with interpersonal skills and affective responses, issues of power, control and decision-making. Staff must be very clear about the extent of their own boundaries, be willing to enter into the process as fully as everyone else and live with the results like everyone else.

### Areas of Collaboration

Depending upon the group, the course of study, the time available and staff, the areas of collaboration will vary greatly. They must be identified in advance and dealt with collectively at an early stage of the programme. To leave important aspects of collaborative work aside for too long only generates a focus on the anxieties and concerns of the immediate concerns being tackled, which are not the necessarily the most important. Areas of collaboration include:

- **Content objective:** what is to be done?
- **Construction of the programme:** the broad areas to be tackled
- **Methods:** the means to cover the content
- **Teaching approach:** the role and the responsibility of the staff
- **Time:** allocation of sessions and distribution of content over time
- **Human resources:** the use of other people, groups, group members, staff
- **Physical resources:** rooms, equipment to be used and so on
- **Assessment:** methods, preparation for involvement of staff, students, and outside monitors
- **Evaluation:** approach, course evaluation, group evaluation, staff evaluation
- **Supervision:** how and by whom?
- **Administration:** procedures for fees and so on
- **Philosophy:** the nature of the inquiry to be undertaken and its purpose.

Some of these areas are more crucial than others since they will need to be tackled before others; some may be partially negotiable, some may be non-negotiable.

At the outset, staff initiating any programme, whether of three days or two years, are undeniably in a more powerful position than the participants since they 'own' the information upon which the programme is founded. Claiming that the 'literature' is sufficient is to pretend everyone meets on equal terms but they don't. The staff will know the implications of some of the conditions that will not be known to participants and their continuing with the course, or with the institution, gives them a different set of interests to maintain and preserve.

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<sup>9</sup>In this context, we are still talking about conventional institutions, hence the use of 'student'.

Initiating a more collaborative approach does not eradicate power differentials or mean everyone is equally informed, rather, it means that these things are regarded as sufficiently important to be raised and investigated with a commitment to making them interfere with the activity as little as possible.

**The Shift in Staff Position**

Once process issues are acknowledged as important, the traditional position staff hold becomes untenable. Once individuals are invited to inquire with their wider responses and move outside of the cognitive domain, the power relationship and the teacher as arbiter of conduct has to give way. Activity that involves process elements being acknowledged in an assessment should necessarily involve a realistic self and peer contribution. After all, who else but the individual and their colleagues can better decide the influence the process has had upon what they have learned? Such a move would represent a radical departure from most assessment schemes, even those currently involving some measure of student contribution.

Who decides about what? As we have noted, teaching staff always have an advantage because they know the terms and set them, although the institutional or funding agency may set some of the terms. In the case of a facilitated peer learning programme, the facilitating team will also have (in almost all cases) greater experience of the content, the method and the assessment process than participants. This needs acknowledgement and recognition; sharing power with participants is not to be confused with simply giving power away to them. A clear recognition about the terms and limits within which the programme is pre-set is essential for the success of any negotiated learning enterprise. And if those organising the event have not given it sufficient thought, you can be sure the participants will – at a time when you would least want them to. The table below gives some of the options available in who decides what.

Who Decides		
Staff	Staff and Students	Students
All areas	None	None
Some areas	Some areas	None
Some areas	Some areas	Some areas
Some areas	None	Some areas
None	Some areas	Some areas
None	All areas	None
None	None	All areas

**Table 1: Degrees of Negotiation and Participation**

Finding the optimum is not simply an ideological question, but one related to the pragmatics of the training, the length of the course, the style and means of assessment. What and how the learning is assessed is intimately related to who has been involved in the decisions about what was to be done and how it was to be done. A balance between all three groupings will be something to aim for; since this pays respect to the autonomy of each group yet draws their shared interest and skills together to make the endeavour worthwhile.

**Assessment and Responsibility**

How I learn is clearly important in devising an assessment process; no less important is how I provide the evidence to demonstrate my learning. In courses which rely upon process skills and group work methods, a good deal of the ‘evidence’ surrounding what I have learned will be accounts of changes in understanding or perception that were facilitated by experiences I have received. These will be ‘live’ experiences rather than responses to ‘taught’ material. These are considerably more difficult to specify and make concrete to others. I may know ‘my sensitivity’ to others has increased, it may not be as apparent to everyone else. How far such claims can be recognised poses an important question taken up later. Some form of self-assessment linked to peer assessment, to give a balance and provide other sources of information to enrich the process, is an essential link.

Because assessment itself is such a process 'activity', it is also a further source of learning that should not be underestimated. Identifying which criteria to apply to an activity, how to report upon it, how to evaluate performance against it realistically and how to make claims of competence, are in themselves very challenging activities. Indeed, they are likely to yield as much useful learning as the course that provided the experiences that is being assessed.

"Assessment is the most political of all the educational processes. It is where issues of power are most at stake." John Heron, *Assessment Revisited*, p13, University of Surrey, 1979.

If staff control assessment procedures then they retain the power and control over course validation, which, in turn, sets limits to the potential for collaboration in other areas that will inhibit such collaboration even in areas of relative unimportance. Self-determination in setting learning objectives and in programme design is unlikely to make much real progress without some form of self-assessment to accompany it.

As we have already noted, assessment is an important part of learning. The question, 'What did I learn?' can be answered in a variety of ways through tests, examinations, performance and reflection. In most programmes of learning, what is learned is examined according to criteria established by those who provided the course, rather than those who have undertaken it. This at least has the merit of consistency, since those who are examined have rarely been consulted about what it is they should learn in the first place. The assumption that learners stand in some relationship of inferiority to those providing the learning runs through our educational practices from primary school to professional accreditation. All learning and assessment procedures are based upon a set of assumptions about the nature of learning, the responsibilities of those involved and the means by which it should be conducted.

If we assume individuals possess a potentiality for self-direction and have nothing to lose from a mutually collaborative assessment with their peers, then many of the assumptions about present educational practice require reconsideration. How far do we acknowledge, in practice, the contribution that learners could make upon the enterprise in which they are engaged? How far are present practices rationalised to protect the power of the accreditors, the status of 'knowledge professionals' or to maintain standards of selection and entry into professional groups at levels that satisfy the professionals themselves? Finally, how far is the whole process a way of providing a measure of protection and security for those whose jobs it is to provide the teaching? Knowledge is power and control of assessment and accreditation is one of the principal means of legitimising it.

Any course or programme of study that implements a measure of genuine self and peer assessment will introduce a shift in the roles and power relationships between staff and participants, and amongst participants themselves. If my colleagues and peers are the external arbiters of what is acceptable, rather than the teachers or examinations, then the investment in paying attention to what is going on increases. Rivalries, jealousies, favouritism, which all influence the traditional style of communicating but which play no part in the evaluation and assessment, begin to surface and contribute to the process that a participative group or a collaborative inquiry is engaged upon. Such issues are no longer left unattended but become part of the process in so far as they affect individual performance or judgements.

Individual responsibility takes on an increasing dimension and the skills of disclosing perceptions, challenging others and being challenged in turn, become essential skills to help the process get under way. The group and its own process becomes an essential vehicle for study, since its functioning affects the way individuals feel free to contribute and participate in decision-making processes which will shape some or all of their learning.

Staff can no longer assume the unquestioned acceptance of their suggestions, minor or major ones. They must be willing to explain and put forward a convincing case for the adoption of any course of action they propose. Their perceptions, however accurate, of the 'process' issues affecting the group are as subject to disagreement and rejection as anyone else's. And yet, they do still stand in some special relationship to the course, if only that they are paid to guide the activity and if only because they are less transient than any particular group. As mentioned earlier, staff stand in the position of guardians of the spirit of the course or programme able to hold the essential and non-negotiable boundaries. They can refer to the documentation of the course to support them, the prospectus, or course contract, and equally be able to model living and working with uncertainty and ambiguity, surrendering more and more of their psychological power as the course proceeds.

### Aspects of Authority

In traditional educational institutions, the teachers are vested with an institutional as well as an educational authority. They represent the values and standards of the organisation itself and maintain codes of behaviour and conduct. This dual role of authority of, on the one hand, having special knowledge or skills to pass on, and, on the other, being vested with the power to insist upon behavioural standards, is so taken for granted that it is an assumption that they are one and the same thing. However, once a group moves towards some form of peer learning model, these become filled with ambiguity and uncertainty.

There is the area of knowledge and skill to be acknowledged; there is the area of representing the institution's values, enshrined in the course prospectus or contract. There is also a third and much more complex area of overlap and that is the authority the staff member can be expected to exert over the means by which the group regulates its affairs and sets standards of performance or attendance upon other members. If staff insist on controlling all the ground rules to the learning process, the participants may cover a great deal of material but only at the expense of taking responsibility away from their own learning. If staff leave all ground rules open to negotiation they leave the group open to the risk of losing its way in the struggle to design the structure to contain the task they are engaged upon.

### How Far to Go

The stark decision is about how far to structure the learning situation and how far to give the group power to negotiate its own conditions, when this is done, and how this is done in relation to the course or programme and its aims and objectives. This is a major influence upon the success of a self and peer assessment process and cannot be overestimated. It is something, needless to say, that cannot be learned in advance, or by reading these papers. It can only be discovered by implementation and reflection upon the experience in the light of what has been aimed at, and how far it was deemed to have succeeded.

Essential, then, to any move towards the introduction of an element of self and peer assessment is the exploration of ground rules and outlining, through collaboration, the area of individual participation and group and staff responsibility for the overall functioning of the course. Since the staff will be managing this process and stand in a different relation to the course from the participants, how able they are to do this and how sincerely they model the process will go a long way to establishing the resulting working climate.

If authority is the impersonal result of the role that someone is playing, power is the personal way in which that is exercised. Most individuals are so well conditioned to regard anyone in a teaching role with deference, or resentment, fear, hope, expectation or cynicism, that initially students and teachers do not meet much as *real* (as in fully present rather than in a role relationship) people. The 'projections' of the individuals will play a large part in the beginning in how they behave and how they look upon the activities they are asked to undertake. The teacher can either be unaware of this, with its influence being largely outside any conscious interference, or they can be aware of it and manage, manipulate or exploit it. It is, however, a fact to be reckoned with.

Since teachers operating in a participative or a peer learning model are themselves the product of an oppressive authoritarian system, they will be as vulnerable to self-deception, error and illusion as anyone else will. There will be times when they will get it wrong because they do not have sufficient insight into the process to do otherwise. There will be times, too, when they will mismanage situations, offering too much freedom inappropriately, or holding a group back unnecessarily, and these may be difficult things to acknowledge. As members of staff enter into the process they may have to face much that is uncomfortable. They will also have some measure of difficulty in identifying just what they might wish to change or do differently next time, because the group will rarely give feedback unanimously. Sifting and sorting out group comments about one's own style and use of power is no easy matter. Struggling to maintain the right to learn, too, is not a model most participants actually wish to see in practice, whatever they believe in theory.

When challenging the power and authority of a staff member for the first time, the peer learning dimension of the programme can become little more than a ritualistic muttering about small issues if group members feel themselves to be unready, or if they feel the teacher is unready to deal honestly with the issues concerning them. There is little worse than teacher-induced feedback sessions which are defensive attempts to give students a chance 'to clear the air' and ventilate their feelings. Individuals not only need to be allowed to speak openly, they need to know that they have been heard and listened to. Many teachers at this point fall back on the standard pose of showing no signs of having felt the comments made (though they might well have felt them) and little genuine dialogue results, leaving individuals feeling they have been outmanoeuvred. Developing a peer learning group demands the development of wider facilitator skills than most teachers possess. Few participants have the skills of participation and collaboration at their command either.

*Openness and trust are easy words to write, but they are difficult to live out in the challenging forum of an involved group working with demanding issues.*

## Chapter 6: The Challenge of Self and Peer Assessment

### Variations on a Theme

There are an increasing number of programmes that have a diluted form of something that is termed 'peer assessment'. Too often they focus around elements of practice that are not 'live', such as videos or audiotapes. Usually these are then checked against tutors' marks and comments for verification. The 'students' (for such is what they are, rather than participants in a common enterprise), are left in no doubt that whatever they come up with will have to tally with that of the authority figure. In this way, the group is only being allowed to practice something that has no teeth; it lacks the power, significance and the very real bite that comes with a well-developed self and peer assessment process.

Most such efforts share two things in common, a lack of any reality between the practice of the assessment process and the programme as it has been lived by those involved, and a serious unwillingness to be live about the assessment process. It is unlikely that people who have not practised serious and long-term relationships involving significant disclosure and feedback can begin to enter into something as sophisticated and committed a process as a peer assessment process. Feedback, however valuable (and it is), is not the same thing as working out a way of evaluating how you are going to respond to a colleague's account of the evolution of their learning in relation to a field of endeavour. Having said that, feedback is a crucial element in a peer style of learning and assessment, and all those involved in this form of collaborative endeavour will have had to learn how to both give and receive feedback, including written feedback.

Such an assessment moves quite outside some notional objectivity about how to rate a piece of videotape, or even a series of tapes. The reluctance to engage with difference and dispute, to face issues of failing (of people not being competent in the claims they are making or to meet the standard required) is deeply distressing and difficult to manage. Peer assessment, when practised only in areas of the programme that it is safe to offer up, like a sacrificial lamb to give some semblance of involving learners in important decisions, can be little short of destructive and does nothing to promote devolving power and responsibility to learners in a substantial way.

The real decision-making about standards and performance, about facing people with difficult news that has been postponed for too long, makes manufactured attempts to use peer feedback into something approaching what is expected here a risky enterprise. The danger is of people being told, in a hit-and-run fashion, information that could have been offered a good deal earlier and at a time when something might have been done about it. Unless a relationship exists between those involved, there is every likelihood that such efforts will either become ritualised occasions for pleasantries or the unleashing of pent-up resentments that have not been dealt with at the time and place they occurred. Such activities have no place in a real self and peer assessment process.

One question often asked is, 'Can people actually rate a good performance?' Yes they can, if given the time to consider it, the time to prepare it, and the opportunity to evaluate themselves thoroughly enough. They require all those things as a prerequisite. This has implications for how much self and peer assessment can be reasonably introduced to shorter programmes of study and how much the learning group has to be given the trust, respect and authority to deal with the question. ***This places the learning group as a continuous entity at the heart of the enterprise.***

Open learning, distance learning, and other methods that do not rely upon the continuity of the learning group cannot expect to develop the skills and competencies to achieve what is being advocated here. Group cohesion, trust and experience together are vital ingredients in the process of self and peer assessment. It is important to encourage a sufficient range of skills and experiences for assessment and not rely on a few which are concentrated on a single aspect of performance. *Inter-observer reliability* is another issue:

*How do people seeing the same thing but describing it differently develop a common language of description and how often are they interpreting what they see differently?*

In longer programmes in developing interpersonal skills, for example, individuals can be given opportunities to practise developing just such a common language and understanding. This does not remove all such misunderstandings, but it does reduce them.

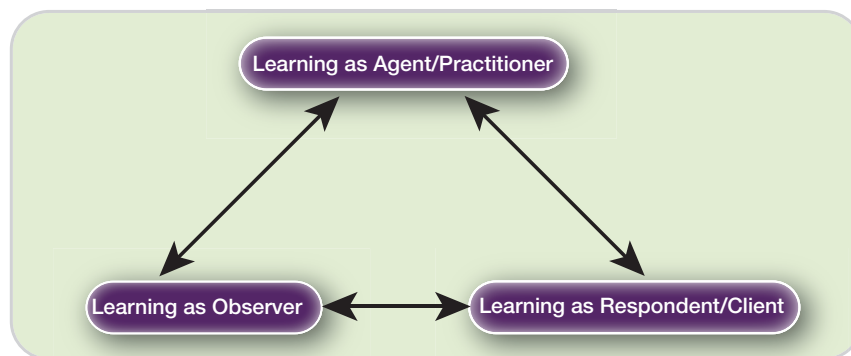
### Issues in Self and Peer Assessment

“A rational person has no interest in deluding himself about his own competence, and he will use the insight of his peers to attain a just self-appraisal.” John Heron, *Assessment Revisited*, University of Surrey, 1979.

A programme being offered with the peer principle as its prime way of operating must also contain the peer element in the essential process of assessment and awarding of any qualifications. If this were not the case, then the programme simple reverts to the traditional model where those outside the group, who set the curriculum and methods of assessment, assess participants.

All longer Oasis programmes are assessed by a process of self, peer and facilitator assessment; a process that most participants are meeting for the first time. It provides a rich and valued source of learning in itself, making the role of assessment quite different from that experienced in traditional learning approaches. It is one of the most challenging aspects of the course, and is designed to enable both the individual and group to manage their own development responsibly.

Additionally, this process encourages the development of self-monitoring skills in relation to personal development, skills practice and the applied work setting. Tutorials also offer participants the opportunity to receive informal feedback from facilitators; this contributes to the formative assessment process. Much of the skills development work takes place in triads<sup>9</sup> and the following triangular method of learning is implicit in the assessment process.



**Figure 1: Skills Development Triads**

The first thing to note about introducing self and peer assessment procedures is that it takes more time to accomplish than anyone can imagine. The second is that it will create ‘process’ decisions that cannot be anticipated in advance and will therefore have to be managed as and when they occur. Thirdly, not everyone will be able to be involved in everyone’s assessment, nor should they expect to be. Fourthly, an assessment *is not a period of structured feed-back*; it is, instead, a rigorous activity in its own right that challenges individuals to lay realistic claims to skills and competencies they have acquired or can use, with evidence and examples to support their claims. Therefore, it requires thought, planning, and time to execute; time alone and time in the group.

With skills like counselling and interpersonal work of all kinds, some criteria that individuals want to offer for assessment may only refer to situations in the outside world, whilst other criteria are observable and can be identified from past practice or even offered ‘live’ before the assessing group. An assessment based entirely on reported performance is likely to be open to challenge in a way that a balance of action and report is not. Participants are not stupid and can see if a colleague is dodging an issue and this, in my view, is why people do not dodge such issues. They acknowledge things that still require effort to master.

Again, too, it is important to take into account whether the assessment leads to an award that is linked to, for example, ‘counselling skills in a work setting’.

<sup>9</sup>Triads: skills practice trios where a listener, a speaker and an observer work together to explore, reflect and debrief aspects of a human relations issue.

If this is the case, participants should expect to make some report on how the learning of the course has affected their work with clients in the setting in which they are operating, and not rely on criteria exclusively centred upon experience in the learning group.

*The assessment is of the individual's progress in relation to the stated purpose of the course. It is not an accreditation (see Chapter 7) to do anything. It forms the basis of an accreditation statement that is, in fact, a separate process.*

### Aspects of a Self and Peer Assessment Process

There are six aspects involved in initiating some form of self and peer assessment process. There are decisions to be made about:

1. **What to assess.**
2. **Who shall decide** what we select and what is relevant from all the available elements.
3. **Which criteria shall be employed.** Once we know what to assess, how do we decide the criteria that are important for ourselves, for our profession, those we intend to serve? It may be there are different criteria for different activities or within the same activity. Do individuals decide entirely for themselves, or do the group and staff collaborate?
4. **How to apply the criteria.** Are criteria applied to past performances on the course and/or practical work elsewhere, for example? Shall they apply to work we do outside the course, in our work settings for example? Shall they apply to a special performance that illustrates our competence, now we've decided on the criteria?
5. **How to go about doing it.** Do we decide it all at once? Is it to be staggered? Does everyone take part all the time in everyone's assessment? Can a small group do it? How shall we go about selection? How much time shall we give it?
6. **Assessing the assessment.** Shall we just forget it now it is over? How well did the process succeed? Did it meet our needs? Can we contribute anything out of our experience to others following behind? What lessons emerge for the staff, the course, the profession, the service users, and us?

### What and Who Decides the Criteria

A major challenge in initiating any self and peer assessment process lies in the generation of useful criteria. We are so used to other people defining standards of performance on our behalf that most people find the idea of working out what constitutes an effective level or a competent performance of a skill or activity daunting. 'Criteriological' thinking is given low priority in our culture and, as a consequence, individuals may rate themselves effective, or ineffective, without clearly working out the standards they are employing to reach such decisions. Coupled with low self-esteem and a tendency to underrate themselves, most people, in my experience, are more judgmental of their own performance than they may need to be. This is true both of written work and process skills.

Deciding on a number of criteria is important. Too many criteria, for instance, means that people have to say a little about a lot, leaving too little time for self-exploration. A balance across a range of criteria is important too, so that individuals are encouraged to introduce important learnings that may appear 'incidental' but which have had crucial effects. There is also a need to balance generalities with specifics; 'empathy', for example, is important in counselling, but difficult to measure, whilst being able to use 'key word reflection' is a specific skill, but not the essence of what makes a good counsellor. If there is to be a mix between group criteria and individual criteria, again a balance has to be negotiated and agreed.

When the final choice is made as to number and balance between group and individual criteria (staff having contributed as participants throughout), the meaning of the criteria must be made explicit; they should be shared and understandable.



The criteria to be used can come from a variety of sources:

- **Individually:** each person provides their own
- **By the group:** via brainstorming, discussion and clarification
- **By the staff:** who can offer criteria for adoption or rejection
- **By an external group:** which may provide accounts of what it requires or expects
- **A combination of some or all of the above:** negotiated with all interested parties concerned.

If common standards of practice are important or technical competence plays a large part in the assessment, then some common criteria would obviously be important. There is nothing wrong in such cases, however, in splitting the assessment process: partly technical performance and partly process contribution in a two-part mode of assessment. Common criteria are important to groups that accept high levels of accountability to others, including doctors, dentists, counsellors, teachers and so on. Autonomous standards set by the individual will be more suitable for interpersonal skills, personal development work, and so on, where accountability lies primarily to one's self. However, the contribution of others is likely to be important, so even here a mix of criteria can often be a useful salve to over-rigorous standards of one's own.

### Additional Learning

On programmes that have a relatively high level of personal development and negotiated content, it is likely that some of the learning achieved is beyond that which an individual expected to be able to learn. This may relate strongly to:

- Personal learning
- Applications of learning.

There may well be some things that an individual knows now that they didn't know they didn't know. In other words, the range of what it is possible to know may well have increased as a result of development in personal awareness or skills practice. Being aware of such an increase in the potential for learning may be every bit as important as any direct learning that has taken place, since it may be opening up important new directions for the future.

Any programme of study involving behavioural changes, 'live' performances demonstrated in interpersonal skills or other interactive elements, immediately faces difficulties in introducing elements of self and peer assessment into its procedures. An example can highlight the point: *Jane is now 'more able to challenge Peter effectively' as a result of the course.* He may think this represents a significant skill acquired and uses it to highlight the changes she made. But can she challenge others or only Peter? Who has seen her attempt to do this and what did they think? Has she continued to challenge Peter or was this on one occasion and if so, was it a sufficient demonstration of real learning? How far does this ability carry over to other situations and with other people in her outside life?

In many cases these kinds of questions are crucial. It is not simply sufficient to be assertive on a course, it is important to have the confidence to be assertive where it matters – in life! However, there are few assessors to give feedback when you are challenging a sales person at the checkout on a Friday night.

In skills learned off the job, but which are related to on-the-job-performance, there are major questions of transferability. I may, as a colleague, feel you counsel me effectively, but I may be a very different person from the clients you deal with. I may still think you are far too 'withdrawn as a member of the group', but I may not realise just how mistreated you have been in the past and that to even be in the group at all may be a major achievement. Such influences are not incidental; they are often crucial to the contribution that individuals are able to make.

### The Place and Assessment of Written Work

It is essential in a true peer and self-assessment model that all elements of the course are assessed following the process just described – including written work. If assignments, case studies or projects were to be assessed in the more familiar, traditional way with marks or grades being given by the facilitator (read 'teacher'), it would undermine the whole enterprise and give very confusing and conflicting messages to course participants. Perhaps, therefore, the dilemmas of peer methods come under challenge most clearly when it comes to this element of peer assessment procedures.

It has been argued that it might be all very well for people who undertake to learn together to develop a form of practice in the world (e.g. helping work of all kinds) to begin to have some notion of what constitutes a 'competent performance'. They might, therefore, just be able to engage in peer and self-assessment about it, but written work – that's much more important and quite outside the competence of learners to judge. In a similar vein, it is also often claimed that video recordings of practice will somehow ensure that peers won't collude so completely and that an outside examining body can have access to the results and check them. In all the voiced reservations of these kinds (and there are many) what we come up against is the mistrust of the learner; the belief that learners somehow will want to cheat, that they will not have learned enough to measure themselves accurately and that their standards will not be rigorous enough.

They all bespeak a deep and complete sense of disbelief in the capacity of human beings to work out together what they mean by effective performance. It assumes that they are incapable of devising ways to measure it and that they simply could not be trusted (as much as those who know better can be trusted) to do a decent job. It also assumes that people are inherently unable to develop workable ways to rate performances that have validity in the world of practice they seek to enter.

Written work is almost always left to teachers to take away, mark and comment upon. This is where the real assessment is made. The written work is there: it can be referred to. It has permanence. It is a form that fits with the traditional measures. It can be taken away and digested or read in haste and it leaves the marker able to make observations that can fail to take into account the cost of the work to the person who has written it. What matters is the standard and whether it has reached the standard.

These days, almost everyone has recognised that the capacity to write about something or even talk about it, is in no way related to the capacity to do it – practice and theory are not much related when it comes to human relations (and just about all practice-based activities). (This is not to suggest that theory is not important, only that it is not the test of how good a practitioner someone is likely to be.) Yet that is what gets the attention: that is what the system is built around and as the helping world has become more preoccupied with gaining a ready acceptance in the existing world, it has adopted the traditional measures.

Reading people's work is a solitary experience. Writing comments upon it enables someone who has not had to demonstrate their own practice (let alone their written abilities) to comment upon the theoretical limitations of someone else and the two are never brought into relationship to explore it. Comments may be discussed in a tutorial, but the judgement of the one about the other has no reciprocation. The tutor is not offering themselves and their work in like manner. If staff are not careful, given the ways in which most people have been put down and otherwise made to feel their written skills are unappealing at best, and incompetent at worst, the whole effort to create a more collaborative culture can break down around issues of written work.

There seems to be something deep within the psyche makes the opportunity to shred someone else's contribution and take a red pen to it irresistible. Otherwise well-meaning staff, once given the chance to wield the pen and make comments, find themselves suddenly equipped with the skills of a literary critic and start attacking the poor participant's efforts as though they were contending for a literary prize. All proportion deserts the act and the participant receives a deeply wounding (however well meant) critique of a piece of work into which they may well have put great effort and commitment. There is always something wrong with a piece of written work; once it is done any fool can see what else might have been put in, what else would have been worth looking at, how many other references have been missed.

The questions are, 'Is it enough?' and, 'Does it complete the task – adequately?' It appears that most teachers find it hard to acknowledge what 'enough' is. Even when praising someone's efforts there is often an implicit, 'How about this?' or, 'Did you think of that?' Education as practised in Great Britain, and written work particularly, is filled with this deep commitment to undermining the confidence of the participant in the value of their own assessment of their own contribution. When it comes to assessing written work in a peer education programme, a great deal of necessary attention has to be given to both raising individual awareness of the pain and distress people carry around such issues and to enabling them to 'discharge' (the self-managed skill of emotional release) some of the hurt and unnecessary negative beliefs that it has inspired.

When fellow participants enter into this endeavour together, they very quickly develop a real appreciation for what is involved in putting together a useful piece of writing that reflects a real commitment for the person who has done it. When this has taken place over a period of time, when you have seen in depth what this has cost them because you have been there with them and you too have had similar struggles, the peer assessment process becomes an important and dynamic learning arena in its own right. When peers know they are circulating their work to their colleagues, they are concerned that it does justice to the time it will require to be read and commented upon. When people have spent a sizeable period of time together and come to read each other's accounts of aspects of their learning, they expect it to reflect the changes and growth they have seen – they do not want an assignment that simply fulfils the course requirement.

Feedback then is much more 'real' and engaged. It will be offered face-to-face and there may well be revisions and discussions about modifications. Work in progress can be circulated and the whole element of the written work becomes something that lives as a strong and central feature of the programme as a whole, rather than a necessary hoop to jump through in order to gain a diploma.

### **Equality of Consideration and Opportunity<sup>10</sup>**

In attempting to establish a peer element in any training, development or educational activity, equality of consideration is an important feature. What is meant by this term is that the needs, interest, skills, and resources of contributors to the course, both participants and staff, are equally worthy and deserving of attention. It is open to anyone to contribute or intervene in the course as it proceeds in any way that they judge to be useful, appropriate, or relevant. And at the same time they can expect to be challenged to give an account of how their intervention is designed to promote the activity in which they are all engaged.

These two elements, **equality of consideration and opportunity**, should not be taken to imply that all contributions are of equal value in meeting course objectives, that the skills and resources in participants are of equivalent value in respect to fulfilling course requirements, or that everyone has equally important things to say all the time or that they will necessarily get their own way. However, these twin principles do mean that equal attention must be given to a consideration of what individuals want from the course and what different individuals bring to the course. Equal opportunity must also be given to each person to allow their needs to surface, to be expressed, to exercise their judgement upon events, to indicate their view of the direction the course is proceeding, to influence the process and make use of whatever skills and resources they bring with them to the course.

A number of implications follow from the principles of equality of consideration and equality of opportunity, which need to be made explicit to anyone contemplating incorporating elements of a peer learning model in their practice.

1. The first implication to note is that the traditional distinction between staff and participants is not obliterated as may be supposed. The balance changes, but each has different needs, skills and resources and:

“... the discovery of these differences is essential to the vitality of the course.” *John Heron, The Concept of a Peer Learning Community*, p3, University of Surrey, 1974.

2. As course design becomes fully participative, the result is the emergence of a programme to which each participant is committed. This follows since each has contributed to its final shape and in some measure the programme has been influenced by each person's particular viewpoint. It may be that participants do not like what they have embarked upon, or they may fear that other methods would have enabled them to fulfil the same objective, however, they will acknowledge and fulfil their commitment to the programme that has been agreed and review their practice in the light of experience.
3. Participants are involved in the process of monitoring and evaluating through periodic course reviews and planning meetings in order to determine the future direction of the course in the light of accumulating information and experience. This might be achieved through the use of questionnaire or other instruments to raise issues, identify reactions and highlight areas for consideration. 'Before' and 'after' responses to parts of the programme could also provide useful methods for generating information.

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<sup>10</sup>These are terms employed by John Heron, who is acknowledged throughout this work as a major source of thinking about the theory and practice of peer learning.

4. Staff and participants are engaged in the process of evolving methods whereby individuals can systematically monitor their own performance in their own areas of professional competence and provide evidence of self-monitoring and self-evaluation of their own individual programme.

A primary source of learning in such a model is the process that takes place between people as distinct from the task upon which they are engaged. Not only is the 'what' important in such learning, but equally important is the 'how' by which that is achieved. Recognition of the importance of the process, alongside the content of the course, needs to be brought to the awareness of all the participants since they can expect to be engaged in reflection upon and clarification of the processes. Process skills are often those in shortest supply given the background of traditional educational activity from which most participants are likely to be drawn.

### Operating a Self and Peer Assessment Process

There are ten key areas that need to be addressed when considering put into practice a self and peer assessment process. Together, they enable participants to be involved in a real and authentic assessment experience:

1. Preparation
2. Personal responsibility
3. Differences
4. Past experiences
5. The degree of voluntary commitment
6. Facilitation skills
7. Course length and pattern
8. The need to record experience
9. The learning contract
10. The learning statement.

#### 1

#### Preparation

Individuals need time to prepare their self-assessment statement, making notes of their performance in relation to the criteria selected. They need opportunities to consider how best to illustrate their claim to a satisfactory standard. Satisfactory participants can do themselves less than justice if they fail to attend to this stage adequately. Individuals work with a partner, from time to time, preparing their assessment and checking-in before the group meets.

Once the self and peer assessment activity is underway it takes considerable time. If individuals and the group have gone to the kind of trouble required by the process, then the actual assessment ought to reflect that. Selecting the size and membership of the assessment group takes a lot of time to organise. There are issues of membership to be considered: getting a balance between those I *want*, those I would *like*, those I *need* and those by whom I am likely to be *realistically challenged*. Staff forcing the issue at this stage or falling back upon 'pressure of time' and deciding such issues on behalf of the group will undermine the whole process. Everyone has to actually trust the process will work out.

Once groups are composed, a running order has to be established. More negotiation is inevitable here, since some people will be in demand to be in more than one assessment at any one time. It is essential that individuals make choices and negotiate for what they want and the group may have to sit through some painstaking and painful wrestling to get a running order that gives everybody enough of what they want – in terms of the people that they wish to have with them at the time they want to do it. There will also be some group members left with time on their hands because few colleagues have chosen them to join in their groups. More lessons about inclusion and rejection will emerge for such people after this process. Depending upon the space available and composition of groups there may be more than one or even two groups conducting an assessment at any one time. Sometimes it may be possible for only one to be operating.

<p><b>2</b> <b>Personal responsibility</b></p>	<p>Each individual is in charge of their overall assessment period from getting their group together and sorting out how they may wish to record the session (often by tape and usually a scribe to keep track of the key points). The assessment has two parts. The first part is a self-assessment statement relating to criteria that have already been agreed. Peer assessment based on the self-assessment and any additional remarks that may be requested, offered or negotiated forms the second. Time needs to be allocated to the balance of these two activities so that both self and peer assessment elements are genuinely engaged in as a collaborative activity – no easy matter.</p>
<p><b>3</b> <b>Differences</b></p>	<p>Differences over assessment may require longer periods to be negotiated at a later time and may involve other group members and/or staff. It can be useful to have an outside figure as an authority to appeal to if necessary: to ‘moderate the process’, not to decide on the outcome. However, if the process has been done rigorously it is rare for such problems to occur. The time taken to prepare the process itself encourages people to gain a realistic description of their learning or, if anything, to undervalue it. Indeed, this is one of the issues that self and peer assessment highlights time and time again: the difficulty that people have in laying claim to the skills and competencies they actually do possess.</p>
<p><b>4</b> <b>Past experiences</b></p>	<p>Traditional educational practices of presentation, assessment and programme design provide most people contemplating the outline of a peer system with a number of practical barriers, not least of which is cynicism that such an endeavour could ever be more than an idealised dream. As described earlier, many participants claim an interest and desire for greater involvement in the design and structure of their education only to find how difficult, time consuming and challenging the task is.</p> <p>Lack of genuine opportunities to influence the learning process to which they have been subject is a major obstacle for all those entering into a peer model. Past experience can contribute to severe rigidities in behaviour and raise issues of conflict and authority as members work through their own personal agendas of distress brought with them from their experience of traditional education. Past conditioning and attitudes towards such things as tests and evaluations need to be worked through as the course proceeds.</p>
<p><b>5</b> <b>The degree of voluntary commitment</b></p>	<p>Voluntary attendance and commitment is almost a prerequisite for the establishment of any collaborative endeavour. However, it does need to be recognised that there are degrees of voluntariness in that people attend for a variety of reasons, influencing how far they are genuinely committed to the course. If the course offers accreditation that an individual regards as valuable, they may enter with a much more instrumental commitment than those who may be strongly motivated to both the principle and the outcome of the programme. Some people may even be ‘directed’ to attend, or feel they have little option or choice. These issues need to be raised and examined before they cause greater difficulties at a later stage of the course.</p>
<p><b>6</b> <b>Facilitation skills</b></p>	<p>Just as individuals bring a range of past experiences with them in relation both to content and process of the course, so past attendance on courses also influences their expectations. The degree of familiarity with similar subject matter may play a significant part in shaping their style of participation, motivation and expectation.</p>

Equally, each will bring a range of interpersonal experience and skills to contribute toward the processes that take place within the course. Recognition of the process must be linked to encouragement for individuals to develop their skills at facilitating their own and others' learning. The level of such skills will play a large part in shaping the atmosphere, both as the course begins and as it develops. The ability, for example, to handle, control, discharge, and transmute feelings plays an important part in the quality of the experience of any group working in a peer model. It may be that the group consciously decides to set aside time to develop these skills overtly, in order to improve the level of skills present for managing the interpersonal issues that will necessarily arise.

**7**  
**Course length and pattern**

A course meeting over two days and formed by bringing together a group of strangers provides challenges of a quite different order from a course that meets weekly over two years, including residential elements and offering a diploma at the close. Short courses are considerably easier to mount and operate on some form of peer system than longer ones, since there is insufficient time or opportunity to surface some of the deeper implications that can only appear when working in such a mode over a longer period.

**8**  
**The need to record experience**

In courses where a substantial measure of the learning is via participative or experiential methods, citing examples of demonstrated competence might be difficult if some record has not been maintained over the course. Any participant waiting until the closing sessions of a course to organise their self-assessment is likely to offer patchy evidence for the claims they are making of genuine learning they may well have achieved in the past.

The starting point of the assessment is maintaining and recording progress. A course diary, journal, log, or record is a major device for participants to develop the habit of reflection upon practice that is crucial in retrieving learning from experience. Kept throughout the course in a manner and style suited to themselves, participants enter into a dialogue with themselves that helps the process of self-direction and the development of personal responsibility. Linked to review elements at the start and close of sessions, individuals and the group as a whole begin to recognise the importance of the shared reflection on practice and the value of exploring insights and observations. Experience ceases to be an end in itself, of something good or bad, but becomes the raw material for the individual to 'process' into understanding.

**9**  
**The learning contract**

A *learning contract* is another essential feature that enables individuals to trace their own progress. Developed at an early stage in the course, individuals begin to take responsibility for identifying their individual learning needs along with other group members over the course. From such sessions, facilitators can then modify the design of future sessions to acknowledge or take into account needs appearing in the group. A learning contract is not a 'hard' document that governs the individual, but a direction, a point of reference that can be referred to and reassessed in the light of the unfolding situation. In this way a 'poor' contract may turn out to be more valuable than a 'good' one, in that it may shed light on the obstacle that the participant puts in their desire to always get it right and so on. The questions for a learning contract are:

- What do I want to learn?
- What will I have to do to achieve that?
- Is that a realistic goal to aim for?
- What might get in the way?
- How will you and I both know when you have succeeded?
- How might you sabotage yourself?

**10**  
**The learning statement**

All the criteria that have been generated during the course, whatever they are, need to be addressed in the learning statement. In some programmes, areas for generating criteria may include such topics as:

- Self-development: personal and practitioner
- Self-in-group: participation, relatedness, contribution
- Power and authority: how they have been managed
- Self in society
- Contribution to wider relationships
- Acting as an agent for social change.

The learning statement summarises the principal learnings achieved by each individual at the close of the course. This is both a reminder and a record of achievement that clearly illustrates the claims made by the individual participant. In preparing a statement there should be some brief rationale for the method and purpose of those things that are to follow. It should reflect the breadth of the course experience and offer a balanced, realistic account of progress and learning. There should be a match between the statements made, the way they are expressed and an accuracy of description, as well as clarity. Limitations to practice should also be noted, indicating that the individual is aware, not only of what they can do, but also up to what level of skill, experience and expertise they are able to perform.

***Table 2: Operating a Self and Peer Assessment Process***

## Chapter 7: Accreditation

To be accredited is to be 'officially recognised' or 'generally accepted'. It is 'having guaranteed qualities' (Concise Oxford Dictionary). The assessment process does not ensure those things and the learning statement need not either. The accreditation process is an additional step forward. It may be lengthy or it may be comparatively straightforward depending on what the training has set out to accomplish and what individuals are using the training to accredit themselves for. An assessment process is a measure of accomplishment and in itself it rarely ensures a right to 'do' something. Accreditation is akin to a licence: linked to ideas such as vouching for, providing a warrant for, authorising.

The real centre of power is in the hands of those who have the power to authorise, to licence and to approve who can do what with what, where with whom, for what reward. Accreditation is the means of controlling the activity, and controlling the position the activity holds amongst other activities that are either in competition with or at odds with the one in question. Accreditation enables those who are included to know they belong to a distinctive body and to proclaim a common form of recognition, to expect others to know what their status is generally regarded to be worth. Traditional methods of accreditation rely upon the new entrant measuring up to the required standards of the elders and betters of the practice in question. Traditional rituals, (usually in the form of examinations or assessments) are devised to maintain obstacles at the point of entry to discourage the faint-hearted and to create an aura of exclusivity for those who enter safely inside.<sup>11</sup>

In earlier times, accrediting a traveller to act as an envoy, for example, would be an important requirement. In order to ensure people were who they said they were, credentials were important as a means of distinguishing the fake from the genuine. There is no longer the need to formalise individual ranks and status. We do not live in a society governed by fixed notions like 'The Great Chain of Being'<sup>12</sup> and a belief that everyone should know his place and no one shall move. The Divine Right of Kings passed away some time ago and with it went the certainty of rank and status assuring privileged positions and treatment. In a more open and democratic world, no one need fear being duped by someone posing as belonging to one class when in reality they belong to another.

The social fabric will not collapse overnight if someone from a humble background actually makes it into the ranks of the successful, as was once feared. It is from notions such as these that the need for legalistic forms of accreditation derives and still draws their strength. At a time when most people will move careers (and maybe even professions) every few years, what value is it to spend a fortune getting accredited to an activity that may be your livelihood for only a few years? Well, it enables you to have access to other similar professions when the time comes to move: all part of the social conspiracy to which professional status gives you access. It exempts you from having to go through the same rigmarole everyone else goes through. It is a form of social membership card that provides entry to all manner of privileges.

Accreditation is, therefore, much to be prized and many new practitioners find themselves only too willing to discover that their former, strongly held convictions about being person-centred and open to negotiation are quite easily sacrificed in order to get accreditation to practice with a professional organisation. There are four principle types of accreditation:

1. Statutory accreditation
2. Authority accreditation
3. Peer accreditation
4. Self accreditation.

Statutory accreditation and authority accreditation are usually linked together, but need not be so. Similarly, self and peer accreditation tend to go together, but need not do so. The first two types of accreditation are familiar types that we meet in the medical world and in other well-established professions.

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<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to note that most professional accreditation procedures rarely involve the person to be accredited having to demonstrate competence across the range of activities that go to make up the practice, whereas in most trades it is necessary to show that not only do you 'know' what is required, you can 'do' what is required. (See Section Three: *Doxa*.)

<sup>12</sup> A beautiful concept, still active in Elizabethan times, that all creation existed in a harmonious order of connection – a form of, 'be thankful that you know your place and don't for heaven's sake question it.'



### Statutory Accreditation

Where some group has a legal framework established by the state to prescribe its parameters (the statutory element), there is likely to be another separate authority that regulates the activity. Within a profession, it is often its own internal body. This body, established by statute and responsible to some governmental agency, is charged with the task of managing the activities of the membership, supervising the licensing of its own membership and performing the legally approved task. The result, in short, is to ensure the profession is firmly embedded within the hierarchy of influence that we know as the 'establishment'. Being part of the established order in almost everyone's mind is a recipe for conservatism and caution. Activities that have any great claims to radicalism or innovation do not seek such a form of regulation and position. To be so 'established' is a by-word for having become a well-adjusted member of the social order. This is something that psychotherapy is unlikely to ever, in truth, be able to claim and, if it were, would no doubt ensure its complete impotence as a social force.

Here the law of the land determines that practitioners and professionals are registered. This is almost always linked to authority accreditation. Statutory powers are used firmly to cement and establish professional oppression. It is conceivable that statutory accreditation could be combined with self and/or peer accreditation as a transitional stage in the move towards de-professionalisation. It would also foster more radical educational initiatives, since some of the issues that self and peer accreditation raises would revolutionise the teaching, and more importantly, the education of the practitioners.

### Claimed Benefits

1. **Safety and protection of the public.** We have only to think of the case of the BSE crisis to recognise how flimsy a form of defence this is. There is a misplaced sense of confidence by the general public in official bodies established to protect the public interest actually being able to perform effectively in the interest of the citizen, rather than in the interests of the Government of the day. Whilst we still live within an authoritarian state that determinedly tells us what we can and cannot do, that has a very limited freedom of information act, no charter of citizens rights and where we remain subjects of a monarch, we are unlikely to see public authorities become either more accountable or more responsive to the needs and wishes of the citizenry.
2. **Clarity of where responsibility lies and clear methods of accountability.** The Bristol hospital trust which took ten years to bring an inquiry forward into infant deaths is a glaring example of how misplaced public confidence is in such systems. The great attraction of such systems is that they sound as though they are the kind of dependable institutional protection that we need, but they are rarely responsive to the public mood until a great deal of anguish has already been generated.
3. **Providing public reassurance.** In the two above examples we see an increasing scepticism in the public mood that undermines confidence in other institutions and in the sphere of public life itself.

### Limitations

1. **The reassurance such accreditation gives is often open to widespread doubt.** The public soon loses confidence in other related bodies when individual agencies that are under pressure are seen to be working ineffectively.
2. **Statutory bodies are often very conservative in relation to embracing new practices or encouraging new forms of practice.** The link between statutory bodies and the socio-political establishment means they are often under the control of like-minded people who all share a similar outlook; one considerably removed from that of the population at large.

In systems of statutory accreditation, the way lies open to all manner of avoidances, temptations and collusions. It has only a limited and well-circumscribed place in a democratic society: one that needs to be well regulated by members of the public, along with those with a particular contribution to make. Many public bodies have traditionally been 'stuffed' with experts who, whatever differences they may have, all have a common social standing and a well-established view of what is good for us. The English class system may be breaking down, yet this form of operating is still in evidence, reducing the scope for the citizen to be an influential actor in public life.

The lack of ordinary members of the public sitting upon regulatory bodies is a national disgrace and an illustration of how far our social and civic affairs are in the hands of professional elites – elites that have largely replaced (where once they were synonymous with) social class elites of previous generations.

### Authority Accreditation

This is the traditional form of accreditation: one provided by an external body. It may be some government agency, a statutory or semi-statutory body that is awarded the authority to ‘license’ practitioners or the special powers of a membership association. Examples include the UKCC (United Kingdom Central Council) for nursing, the accreditation of doctors, accountants and lawyers. Many bodies wishing to gain kudos will ‘ape’ the authority accreditation forms of those who are already licensed in fields they perceive are related to their own, or which they wish others to believe are in some way comparable to the position they wish to occupy. The world of psychotherapy with its UKCP (United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapists)<sup>13</sup> is clearly attempting to give the impression that it stands in a similar relationship to its powers as the UKCC for nursing does, i.e. that it is a statutory body.

The UKCR (United Kingdom Counselling Register), the latest version of registration for counsellors, is following similar lines and attempting to create in the minds of the public a sense of similarity and status to that of the UKCC for nursing. It is interesting to note that the BAC (British Association for Counselling)<sup>14</sup>, which has been the motive force behind the registration of counselling in this country, has not promoted the BRC (British Register of Counsellors) in common with its own name but has gone for the title UKCR as more fitting. Am I alone in thinking that this is a deliberate attempt to mislead the world into believing that a body entitled the UKCR is akin to the standing of the UKCC, as clearly the UKCP would also have us believe?

Authority accreditation is a means of perpetuating dependence upon authority and retaining power by those who have it over those who seek the imprimatur to practice: not something likely to promote innovation and new ways of practice. When a body is given the authority, or more usually takes it or ‘persuades’ the field to accept its authority, then it is usually accompanied by a strong determination to stamp out or marginalise alternative forms of practice and accreditation in an effort to keep others out. Such forms of accreditation are at odds with the spirit of the times and the move towards more autonomous groups, network organisations and the empowerment of the individual to make wise choices about their own decisions.

“What happens *originally*, is that some group of people who are necessarily self or peer accredited as Fs<sup>15</sup> engage in a further, higher order act of self or peer accreditation and authorise themselves to engage in the unilateral authorisation of others to become Fs. Thus experts/ professionals maintain their privileged caste; they create in aspiring Fs an appetite for similar status and similar powers such that these aspirants will conform to the imposed accreditation game in order to become caste members.

The contradiction of the game is that the people who first gave ‘properly qualified’ this kind of meaning necessarily exempted themselves from the definition imposed on others. The method excludes any kind of self and peer assessment prior to accreditation, and excludes any negotiation between the prospective F and the authorities about the accreditation.” John Heron, *Dimensions of Facilitator Style*, p43, University of Surrey, 1977.

### Claimed Benefits

1. **Maintains standards of the status quo at an intellectual, vocational, organisational and political level.** Such an arrangement is often favoured because it implies a strong form of social control and it certainly provides for the psychological and social security needs of many by maintaining a hierarchical social system with power vested very firmly with the accrediting professionals who control entry.

<sup>13</sup> Since this was first written, the British Association for Counsellors and Psychotherapists (BACP) has become the major body.

<sup>14</sup> The events described here have taken place over the last 20 years and during that time there has been a steady progression towards regulatory authoritarianism by the BAC. Originally, the BAC was a membership organisation for those with an interest in counselling but over that period it has become the equivalent of a professional body; it is now known as the BACP.

<sup>15</sup> Many of the ideas contained here are influenced by John Heron’s *Dimensions of Facilitator Style handbook* published in 1977. The quotations referring to that manual use the initial F to represent the facilitators being accredited by whatever system Heron is describing. The reader should note this use and recognise that the F in question could be any practitioner in a human relations context, considering the implications of the various forms of accreditation discussed.

## Limitations

1. **The deep internal contradiction inherent in the enterprise**, as the originators betray the radical impulse of their original purpose. For example, it purports to be a method of maintaining high standards, both of professionalism, training and education, yet the method that is used is at odds with the educational goal. The self-monitoring and sensitively aware professional is educated by a method that provides no opportunity for this to find any real expression. At the same time she is somehow supposed to acquire this ability by a method which actually prevents the individual holding to the worth of her own experience, as opposed to that of those in power.
2. **Authority accreditation is bound up with an oppressive educational and social system.** It promotes intellectual, vocational and professional conformity, and fear-ridden concerns about what others may think. There is a distinct lack of awareness by those trained in this method about these contradictions and so we have highly competent individuals who have the talent of critical thinking in just about everything, except the method in which they were trained. It also has as a corollary that it necessarily emphasises intellectual and cognitive skills over interpersonal and affective skills, since an authoritarian system is oppressive in the form of the provision, the impositions upon the participant and the operation of the system. This amounts to a form of political exploitation: of oppression by professionalism. Professionals maintain the myth of superior excellence and expertise from which ordinary human beings are necessarily debarred and which it would be irresponsible and dangerous for them in any degree to practice. The professionals by the educational, accreditation and social system they run, condition their clients to see themselves as inadequate and dependent. Psychodynamically, the professions deal unwarily with their own unacknowledged, distressed dependency needs by conditioning others to be dependent upon them. The result is that the clients are manipulated by being labelled, classified, categorised, interpreted and analysed in the names of 'diagnosis' and 'treatment'.

## Peer Accreditation, Peer Assessment

Here, we move to altogether more novel forms of accreditation and ones that are usually linked to some shared form of assessment. In other words, those getting accredited are usually also making assessments. Self-assessment and possibly self-accreditation also usually precedes the process of peer accreditation. Underlying most forms of self and peer assessment is the idea of a community of peers: folk who share a commitment to practice and to being openly accountable to others about how they go about that practice. It is voluntarily entered into and becomes a strong source of both personal and professional development in itself. Practitioners are presented with the challenge of making appropriate claims about their competence, having them rigorously explored and potentially modified in the light of feedback. The key question to ask is:

*What are the attributes and expertise I want to claim I have, in order to offer myself as competent to do this work before my peers?*

Peer assessment may confirm, or not, a form of self-accreditation since it is the individual who is making the claim and the peers who are witnessing it – with more or less harmony. It is unlikely in any community of peers that an individual will self-accredit in the face of strongly expressed reservations and concerns from their peers – though this could and would be allowed to happen since primacy is being given to self-accreditation.

“On the other hand if peer authorisation and prior assessment are exercised in an entirely unilateral manner, without any negotiation with the potential F, then we simply have authority accreditation. It seems, therefore, that peer accreditation necessarily involves negotiation between the potential F and her peers.” John Heron, *Dimensions of Facilitator Style*, p42, University of Surrey, 1977.

## Claimed Benefits

1. **There is accountability to a wider group and the suggestion of a community of peers in a shared endeavour.** For those agitated over protection of the client, it is straightforward to explain that you are accredited to practice with a group of other practitioners who meet every... (whatever the frequency) to renew their commitment to practice.
2. **Motivates self-preparation and sharpens up self-assessment.** The rigour of a self and peer assessment and accreditation system, as those who have entered into it thoroughly will testify, is a daunting experience. This is not simply because it is challenging to account for practice, but also because other peers are supporting the claimant to make the best of their claim.

It is often a challenge when put to it, to actually state what level of work a practitioner can now undertake. Under-claiming is a real difficulty in the early stages of self and peer assessment procedures. A form of collective collusion to minimise the skills, attributes and understandings can come into play out of the imported fears that any claim to effectiveness will be looked upon with suspicion and leave the claimant open to unsupportive challenges 'to prove it'. Recognising that such a process requires a great deal of emotional maturity and sensitivity and a good deal of practice before it goes 'live' is crucial.

3. **Does everything claimed for self-accreditation listed below.** Perhaps the advantage of this system over the one below is the combination of personal authority, which is held as the primary requirement in self-accreditation, with the validation and challenge of peers. Clearly a way lies open for self-accreditation to be no more than the expression of delusional fantasies. At best, self-sustained claims are strengthened by support and validation from others, who stand to gain nothing from their assent. Freely entering into such an arrangement is a strong guarantee of a healthy open-mindedness on the part of a practitioner who practises alone much of the time. Getting some corroboration about how they regard their work can be reassuring. Of course, there is nothing to stop a practitioner entering into such a process with their clients as the assessing group.

### Limitations

1. **Opportunities for peer group pressure, partisan intrigue and schisms** at a certain stage of development, especially if this is an attempt to side step the conventional world but remain somehow attached to it. One of the limitations of all new initiatives is the mixed motives of those signing up. There are the genuine radicals, there are the genuine doubters and there are others who no one can be quite sure about.

There is also the much vexed question of how to proceed. If we meet as peers, how are we to facilitate ourselves through the complexities of a process that may be unfamiliar to many? If there are strong rivalries and ego positions at stake, the process can easily and swiftly become deformed. For example, it may be that people are committed to the process in theory and even want to put it into practice but have anxieties about each other's reputations as a result of hearsay and rumour. When those involved realise they have no guarantees to anything (any more than any other system guarantees anything) some feel that they are better off joining the conventional world. After all this, being an 'outsider' may be all right, but it promises nothing more secure, or of more value, than what awaits with the payment of professional fees.

2. **It can undermine a potential individual member if the negotiations are not clear and practised ahead of time.** For a new entrant to the process, a lack of understanding of the stages and the sequences can make the actuality too daunting to manage. On the other hand, nothing by way of explanation can do full justice to the practice. It is therefore important for those involved to provide some outline and some willingness to go as far as possible, to enable a new arrival to get a 'feel' for what is to come and maybe some practice at it before they go 'live'.
3. **Who is to be an 'accrediting peer'? How are they to be chosen and by whom?** The selection of the group is clearly a matter for consideration and depends upon the activity that is being accredited. Interestingly enough though, since what is really being tested out is the sincerity and accuracy of one person making a claim that their peers will stand by, it is not always necessary to know the deep intricacies of the practice in question. What is important is that there is a willingness not to let disquiet go by unexplored and not to falter when a person is clearly using modesty as a way of hiding their talents even from themselves.
4. **How does this work?**<sup>16</sup> Few people have any real experience of the complexities of the process. The notion of self and peer assessment is so deeply counter-cultural that there is little experience of how to operate such a system with any degree of sophistication. But as more and more people experience more participative learning approaches, attend participative research and co-operative inquiry research projects, and generally become more familiar with collaborative styles of working that reduce barriers to sharing information and which encourage more openness to the other, then such methods will become more and more familiar. However, there is no doubt we have a long way to go.

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<sup>16</sup>See the previous chapters in this section for a discussion about the creation and development of criteria, the rationale and method of this process.

## Self Accreditation

Self-accreditation embodies the concept of personal accountability. Within this there are three major elements:

1. I can give account for my actions.
2. I can give voice to my experience.
3. I can stand by my thoughts.

I invite my peers to enter into dialogue with me. In doing so, I am willing to be open to challenge and clarification that may lead to change. It is difficult to make real change without first knowing where I am. If I am only pretending where I am, if I have no commitment to being accountable, then I may act as I like, give voice to experience which is inauthentic – however passionately felt at the time – and adopt whatever rationale happens to suit me in the moment.

The crucible for this process is immersion in the peer principle and self and peer assessment. Yet there can be places where self-accreditation means little more than that the individual simply puts up a plaque on the wall and waits for clients to come. They may seek some support from others or they may be part of a group who have put real effort into providing a way of evaluating what it is they each do, how they do it, to what standard, over what range of clients and so on. They provide a shared forum to hear and support one another's claims. They may even operate an informal system of support and a means of managing complaints.

## Claimed Benefits

1. **Preserves and enhances the creativity and self-direction of the individual.** Only by repeatedly affirming the worth of the person and their right to be the judge of their own actions will we begin to shift the dead weight of conformity that restrains us all. Self-assessment is a primary, a necessary, precondition for any valuable creativity.
2. **Whenever we do something for the first time we are in effect saying that we have chosen to accredit ourselves as competent,** at least to make the attempt. Such opportunities and conscious efforts help to give a push to further growth, awareness and vigilance in relation to the process of one's own and another's development.
3. **It takes time to prepare, claim and maintain.** It leaves the learning open to the level of understanding and the maximum degree of self-direction. It honours the primacy of self-assessment.

“For the human condition is such that, in the last analysis, each person is her own best judge: the ultimate authoriser of competence within. Competence that depends on its legitimating from without is surely less than true competence.” John Heron, *Dimensions of Facilitator Style*, p40, University of Surrey, 1977.

## Limitations

1. **It is open to the manipulative, the deceivers and the charlatans.** There are, however, some in-built controls. The more distress-distorted or compulsive the individual, the more this will appear in practice. Self-directing learners can soon distinguish those they wish to work with from those they do not. It is unusual for the individual concerned to be totally unknown to those in the work and surrounding it; quality control is informally maintained.
2. **The period of learning may be too short and the claiming may be too grand.** The earlier a claim is being made, the less the subtlety of the distinctions of actual practice, as opposed to supposed practice, will be apparent.
3. **Those receiving the service are at the mercy of the practitioner; there is no seal of approval or quality.** People are not children and an attempt to treat them that way simply infantilises them. It only encourages them to develop, or to maintain, a protracted dependency upon others who are competent in ways they aren't and perpetuates professionalisation and elitism. It runs counter to the increasing availability of information via the internet and the whole self-help movement that will increase in other fields – law, education and medical matters. Looking to external bodies to provide the imprimatur inhibits the growth and development of everyone. Heron pointed out that by 1977 and certainly since most facilitators are self-accredited:

“... virtually all the many very competent Fs in this country... whether in universities, the Health Service, the social services, in industry in growth centres and anywhere else are Fs of this kind – self-accredited, usually in a context of informal peer accreditation. Two things seem to follow from this. Firstly, the relative efficacy of self-accreditation is underlined. Secondly, those who are self-accredited are in no position to demand other forms of accreditation for others.” John Heron, *Dimensions of Facilitator Style*, p41, University of Surrey, 1977.

### Time Limited Statements

Accreditation statements should be time limited. They should be statements that reflect the levels of competence, or areas of practice for a given period, say one to three years, and should then be renewable. They may be renewable in as much as the individual submits an account of continuing work in the field and is re-accredited or, in a more rigorous group, the practitioner will re-submit for a live self and peer assessment process. Groups of practitioners interested in promoting their own development, or improving standards of performance, may develop levels of accreditation to which individuals can aspire. This would make it possible for members of such a peer learning community to contribute to the culture of practice and theory as time goes by and keep alive the spirit of collaborative inquiry out of which they have grown.

Whilst such a scheme may sound both simple and ambitious, the fact that it has not been attempted may indicate something. The world of counselling, as exemplified by the BACP, which is an ideal realm to incorporate this process, does not use such a system in its accreditation of counsellors. Instead, it relies heavily on written documentation submitted to panels of experts who decide without having seen a counsellor in action.

### Anxieties about the Future

Deciding what constitutes effective training for any practitioner, say in counselling, is not quite arbitrary, but relatively so. Who knows? Who decides? All professional groups in the beginning make relatively arbitrary decisions about what constitutes the pre-requisite to practise and then exempt themselves from having to go through the process. Counselling itself is passing through this phase.

“... for any domain of human requirement there is a source point when the originators flourish through self-directed learning and inquiry and through self and peer assessment... they thus set up an unilateral assessment and education system from which they exempted themselves.” John Heron, *Assessment Revisited*, p3, University of Surrey, 1979.

As anxieties about accreditation grow, we are likely to see stringent conditions surround many aspects of professional practice, designed, no doubt it will be claimed, to ‘protect the consumer’ and promote ‘high standards’. Such conditions do neither, since the consumer in need rarely knows how to assess the person they seek out to help them.

We are now entering a period where the professionalisation of just about every form of help is underway at quite a pace. How far it will get and where it will ultimately lead is anyone’s guess. There is every danger that the heart and the mystery of such work may be rationalised out of existence into checklists and competency statements. The increasing number of committees of practitioners elaborating ever more stringent and rigorous standards will ensure that the heart and the mystery enshrined in the processes that occur between people gathered together to learn will retreat from view to those places where learning is still something that is potentially celebratory and joyous.

### A New Paradigm

As we have seen throughout this document, inherent in the concept of the peer principle is commitment, involvement, engagement and choice from all parties in any endeavour. The view is also held that individuals who are regarded by society as being responsible for themselves and their own actions are adult enough to make decisions governing themselves and their conduct. The starting place is that staff and participants share a fundamental equality that the temporary assignment of different roles within a given context does not undermine. Conventional power differences are thus minimised since the learning group is the vehicle for the process of assessment and accreditation – with support and challenge from tutors or staff.

This doesn't sound anything startling but like this, but in terms of authority and power it has enormous implications for those attending such programmes for the first time. They are expected and encouraged to make decisions, to take responsibility, to 'own' and set about meeting their own learning needs. They are given every expectation that they can do it, can collaborate and that the staff will facilitate rather than teach them what they have come to learn. Out of such a base of practice and commitment to developing a set of internal beliefs, which are open to revision and challenge, a form of accountability to match such a form of preparation must necessarily question traditional methods of accreditation and the procedures that accompany it.

The crucial issue for human relations practitioners is to remain committed to finding ways of operating that:

- Are internally consistent
- Honour the peer principle
- Can be described to the uninitiated so they are reassured that practitioners are able to offer what they claim.

It is important to find that place of congruence where the practitioner's way of working with others is honourable and respects their (the client's) self-reliance and choice whilst remaining in harmony, both with the assessment and accreditation procedures of the practitioner and the practitioner body to whom the individual belongs. This is something rarely apparent in current programmes of training. The accreditation statement an individual makes at the close of a successful course is in addition to the assessment itself and the learning statement. It is a description of what the individual is laying claim to be competent to do as a result of the training. It is understood and validated by representatives of the peer group and staff. In some courses the accreditation statements of participants will therefore vary widely and this is to be welcomed.

## Section Three: Doxa: Credibility and Professionalisation in Human Relations Work

Doxa: Pertaining to or depending on opinion.  
An example or collection of examples to serve for practice in a subject.





## Introduction

In terms of a radical education paradigm the peer learning community, with its radical stance towards assessment, must recognise how thorough it needs to be in order to have credibility to assess the level accomplished by participants and the satisfactory nature of the programme.

Assessment, as has already been said, is where the political nature of the enterprise is most revealed. At one level, it is sufficient for those involved – participants, facilitators, possibly visiting contributors – to be satisfied with the rigour of their process, but for the peer learning community paradigm to have validity, it would have to consider issues of accountability. People undertaking a programme may know the value of the programme. Learning statements may give clear descriptions of what they can do, to what level and with whom, but anyone providing such programmes must take into account and attend to how all this lives in the world. It is essential to give an outline of how it lives, how contrary it is to traditional models which have external assessment and an imposed curriculum. If this paradigm is to have any influence it has to show how it has a life beyond the programme and community itself.

This takes us into the whole question of accreditation. The method of accreditation used by any body, group or collection of individuals will also reflect the politics of their endeavour whether or not they can see it or acknowledge it. Here we meet the whole dilemma of internally motivated versus externally motivated forces. A self-directed learner will want to find suitable and appropriate arenas to offer accountability to their peers, if for no other reason than to avoid the delusions that can arise out of individual isolation. In a situation where one person is offering help to another, accountability offers assurance to their peers and to the client that the practice is in safe hands. In that sense, every practitioner stands as a representative of the body of practitioners to which they belong. This creates major anxieties and deep tensions in conventional practitioners and those emerging from the peer learning paradigm.

Tension for the conventional practitioner lies in having internalised an external model of practice and having been assessed as competent by others; they are in the position of the well-behaved child wanting the approval of the parents. Until they have obtained such approval and gained entry, they will understandably refrain from being overly critical of the method of training, standards accomplished or the requirements for entry into the profession. This process is no more than a form of socialisation to ensure that the norms of practice are reproduced as the price of entry for new practitioners. Eventually, this creates a deep ambivalence when the practitioner meets the new, the unknown, and the uncertain because all the preparation is about dealing with the known and working within the norms that are given. Practice becomes highly conservative, risk taking is discouraged and mistakes are reframed as errors that lie in the system or in the client and not the practitioner. This leads to a form of 'defensive practice'. Far from saving the client, at its worst the client is seen as a potential litigant who has to be negotiated around. This adds up to a high level of policing rather than maintaining a strong developmental interest.

For practitioners from a peer learning community the dilemma is whether they can embrace such an approach. How can a practitioner, who can speak their practice, who has peers who can validate their learning and practice, who has no professional body to speak of to represent their interests, work in the traditional world? In line with the desire to promote accountability and self-responsibility those who facilitate longer-term peer programmes need to give serious consideration to assisting practitioners make the transition into the world of employment. They also need to help generate discussion, exploration, experimentation and development of suitable forms of accreditation that suit the world of practice, those served and the institutional arrangements that have a rightful influence on the practitioner.

The call for more adaptable and self-initiated learners in industry and commerce is, in part, helping to draw attention to peer-based methods. 'Self-directed' individuals working in 'self-managed' teams need some parameters to guide their efforts – a peer-based approach might help. Growing use of the term 'peer' (as in 'peer-feedback') as people grapple with the implications of new working arrangements can mean very different things to those who adopt them. Frequently, it implies a degree of collaboration and a degree of goodwill that is unlikely to be found in reality.

It often gives little recognition to the fact that peer-based methods require developed emotional skills and the ability to both offer and receive feedback in sophisticated ways. Moreover, it demands a form of maturity and a sense of self that our current educational practice does not set out to achieve. For those who have some deeper experience of peer learning in practice, accountability and accreditation based upon a peer approach needs a good deal of articulation and consideration if they are not to be confused with other forms of peer working.

Most of the key issues outlined in this section arise out of experiences taken from the helping and human relations world that has been the author's particular background. Though this is only one particular arena, it does have the advantage that many of the issues encountered here transfer to other contexts where peer efforts are undertaken. The underlying dilemmas are therefore likely to travel to many arenas where there are tensions between a traditional desire for reassurance and a recognition that the speed of change is too great for traditional methods of professional recruitment to hold for much longer. The financial services, law, health care and education, once the citadels of professionalism, have all found their positions called into question as a new range of practitioners are licensed to enter and undertake duties that were once only the prerogative of the over-qualified, expensively trained 'professional'.

The helping world is a good example of a newly emerging practice that once stood outside the conventional paradigm but which is now rapidly becoming deformed. Some of the arguments about professionalisation and the desire it fuels to maintain an elitist preserve of practice that guarantees social advantage and financial security to those few who manage to scramble inside are taken up further in these essays.

## Chapter 8: The Drive for Credibility and Respectability

### Registration

The drive to find a convincing form of respectability says much for the self-esteem of those seeking it and for their own security in the work they perform. The desire to have their occupational efforts regarded as requiring and holding the mystique of a quasi-medical form of engagement is no more than a desperate attempt to create a social standing and a privileged position for themselves. A medicalised form of intervention is the last thing to reassure people seeking a helping relationship and who are struggling with the ordinary issues of the human condition. Whilst it is true that many people are only satisfied when they have been duly labelled and have a reassuring diagnosis, this rush to professionalise people's concerns in a medical fashion only panders to that anxiety.

Setting up a human meeting as a profession is to play directly into hopes and idealisations. All the panoply of registration encourages naïve clients to that view and expectation; to then re-educate them that you are not quite like *that kind* of profession is not going to be easy. It is likely to lay the professional open to murderous resentment when they don't deliver the goods that the client believes they had every right to expect. The professional sets the scene that will generate this resentment by informing the client that the process to their 'cure' will take a long time. When the client realises the process is not benefiting them, to be told, 'It takes a long time' is no answer and keeps the client trapped in the relationship. How long, after all, is a 'long time'? For those clients whom the process fails (and any process will fail some people), when they are finally able to extricate themselves from the relationship the resentment is enormous.

Since there is no great body of evidence about what has taken place in the helping relationship, attempts to regulate it are largely attempts to give reassurance to the ignorant and to invite the knowing into a collusive conspiracy that is a pretence to feign control where little exists. But it does foster a climate in which clients feel they have a right to take action against the slightest of disappointments, if they can only be bothered. Peer practice works directly against such a view of the work and the world. It is more about promoting opportunities for individuals to explore the ambiguities, wrestle with the complexities and to stay open to the new challenges that practice brings. This state of affairs does have its advantages for the poor practitioner who has managed to resist the temptation of the gathering pressure to join up. As the regulations become stricter, the definitions tighter and the rules stronger, then practice is more and more defined within a tighter set of parameters. A great deal of the concerns that people want help with and the ways in which they want it then begin to lie outside what is proscribed.

If you work out of a peer model than you are at liberty to jointly work out what to do: professionally regulated, you are in danger of putting your practice at risk, should you admit that you are acting in ways that are not quite what the codes mean. Innovation, trying things out together, these are not fostered by regulation. The only way you know you have enough regulation is when you have too much of it and no one has the determination to remove any of it. The members are then in the grip of a set of definitions that govern practice rather than guide it.

### Policing

Like-minded peers do not need elaborate mechanisms of policing or codes that imply and infer dependency of one individual upon another. The whole notion of the client as 'patient', which is so much part of the professionalisation of the art of conversation, is largely at odds with the peer principle that has been such a distinctive and essential feature of the humanistic approach. At its heart, the peer principle is the re-affirmation that 'what we do with each other' is a shared enterprise that needs to be open to clarification, exploration and challenge. Authority lies with 'us', not out there with 'them'.

Underlying fear seems to be the motive force for many of the preoccupations that currently distinguish practitioner concerns of all kinds. A fear that unless practitioners police themselves, others will do it with less understanding and more control, is something of a trap that faces the humanistic practitioner. It is a difficult argument to counter at one level – except that the art of conversation will not easily be policed. In the end, it is only a matter of a title that is under dispute. If the humanistic practitioner is more attracted to the title of 'psychotherapist' and more interested in finding ways to fit in with the requirements that are demanded from those ascribing that title to themselves, than in the essence of the work itself, then the way forward is already well-trodden.

'Everything has moved on since the early days,' is the view usually advanced to explain the collapse into the embrace of orthodoxy. However, this seems doubtful when the current obsession with standards, accreditation and disciplinary procedures are taken into account. It all has the look of a new hierarchy coming into being that is increasingly dissociated from the impulse that was at work in the beginning. But it does go a long way to ensuring that it creates a new 'profession'; one that only those who have done it the 'right way' and who can conform to the new norms should be allowed to practise. In the end, it may be that the world of helping will settle down to become a niche market that has done no more than 'rip off' some very effective techniques for its own ends. Perhaps it is the fate of all radical impulses that as they are absorbed into the wider society their essence is ignored and their content drained of what is most vital about them, so that they are taken over for ends quite other than those they set out to promote.

### **Qualifications and Performance**

Just about any practice-based or applied activity relies upon the skilled practitioner combining a number of features:

1. **Knowledge:** working knowledge, that is.
2. **Theory:** some informed stance to the work.
3. **Experience:** a range of past examples that inform how to go about this particular occasion.
4. **Insight:** a capacity to see beyond the obvious and maybe even to 'intuit' what else may be at work.
5. The actual **skills** involved to do the thing in question.

What is immediately apparent in such a group of features is that they may be combined in any number of ways to reach an adequate performance. Indeed, part of what makes for artistry in most practice-based forms of activity is the fluent integration of many possible ways of performing the activity over a wide range of differing conditions. Artistry is about knowing the conventions of the activity and not being bound by them: offering a free interpretation with flair and confidence that does not rely upon external authority validating or approving its worth. This kind of freedom of expression and disciplined execution is a matter of personal practice, not conformity to a code or membership of a professional body.

*This makes approving what is good enough a difficult problem:* more so when the activity itself leaves no permanent and attributable traces behind. When my washing machine breaks down, it palpably doesn't work. When Michael, the repairman (who diligently comes out each time it breaks down) leaves, it does. He knows what to do and the evidence that he knows what to do is demonstrated by the results when he leaves – the machine works! When I go to Dorothy, my solicitor, it is less evident that there are permanent traces of her efforts, but there are some. There are letters; there are actions she has instituted (because she reports on their results); there are steps taken in relation to the matter in hand. I know because I am part of the relationship. I don't know much about the law and, in that sense, my trust could be misplaced, but it isn't because over the years Dorothy has been a consistent advocate of a way of approaching legal difficulties that does not elevate her status. She ensures that the decisions I take, we understand together.

I had reason to visit another solicitor once, and for a time I believed and trusted his performance. He appeared competent. He indicated the actions that needed to be taken, agreed to follow up the things he said – but he didn't. It took a long time and had great consequences before I was able to extricate myself from his 'help'.<sup>17</sup> It wasn't his technical competence that was in question; it was the service he provided that made it impossible to conduct the business for which I needed his help. He was well qualified, more so perhaps – than Dorothy, but his qualification was not a measure of his competence and his competence in the end was what mattered to me.

Attempting to complain in such a case would have gained little. It would not have changed the circumstances I was already having to deal with. The professional structure that was in place in the case of a complaint against an accountant, for example, was so well organised that short of 'try again' and, 'We will write a letter asking for the matter to receive attention' I got no useful assistance.

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<sup>17</sup>The matter, ironically, concerned a complaint taken up by former colleagues of mine after a long lapse – five years – since they had worked with me. The complaint was 'managed' by a former close colleague, who explained at the end of her submission she was unsure whether it amounted to a complaint or not. It did the damage however, of that she had no need to doubt. The purpose was, of course, to use a complaint procedure to injure – a common enough way such devices are used by the malcontent, the disappointed. The personal distress and shock at this delayed attempt to invoke a complaints procedure, not in any sense devised to deal with a dispute amongst friends and colleagues, simply to get me was enormous. The time it took to deal with it was equally costly. I learned, from distressing experience, that even the most liberal codes when applied by the uncertain, the self-righteous or the sanctimonious become tools for beating into submission rather than a call to inquiry and real exploration.

It is very different in the helping world however, a client has only to murmur and the full force of the machinery of justice is brought to bear, the tumbrels role and a sacrificial gift is offered up to appease the vengeance of the gods of public opinion. The flurry of sanctimonious breast-beating and self-flagellation that went on when Bernard Manning played a wry joke on the counselling world was testimony to that.

Manning joined the BAC, put a notice on his door and had himself photographed offering himself as a counsellor; presumably to make the point that anybody had the right to make the claim and to illustrate the pomposity and self-importance counsellors were beginning to attach to their activities. Rather than taking it as a timely warning, the profession set out to prove how right he was by instigating great inquiries into how such a meddlesome and dangerous individual could have so outwitted the bureaucracy of the leading organisation in the country. All humour was lost on the respectable Pharisees of the counselling world.

Repairing the washing machine leaves concrete evidence of attention; the law leaves less; helping often leaves none that can be directly attributable to the work undertaken. How do I know that another person talked to in a similar way would be similarly relieved? I don't. So I am encouraged to seek more stringent standards to assess your competence to help. What about your qualifications then?

Here too, we meet the same dilemma as with the solicitor; you may be well qualified but not competent when it comes to managing the actualities of practice. How do we deal with that when you are qualified to practise but are not helpful, or at least not helpful to me, because, you rightly point out, you have been and are helpful to a myriad of folk who have passed through the portals of your consulting room? What about your theoretical stance to all this? Would that form the basis for deciding upon your suitability? It may do that, but your suitability; your general belief system in relation to what you do is no guarantee that you will be able to do anything efficacious.

### Routes to Practice

All the preceding sections are pointing one way – how does the practitioner gain credibility to practice in a world that is unsure of what a human relations practitioner does and unsure of how far what they do is helpful? How far is the activity of helping, to use the most inclusive term for the activities of a human relations practitioner, itself at odds with many of the structures of the world that requires credentials and licensing procedures to practice? How far does a peer model of relationships find itself at odds with such external demands, which so often fail miserably when it comes to protecting those who are vulnerable or exploited?

When it comes to routes to practice there is more to consider than simply putting together a set of procedures that are each one inadequate in the hope that collectively they will become adequate. Baking the wrong mix in the hothouse atmosphere of committees may produce a burnt offering but not a great cake. The five main routes to qualification are:

1. Educational attainment
2. Skill demonstrations
3. Experience
4. Past performance
5. Response over time.

1. **Educational attainment:** a favourite way to gain credibility is to make a link between educational attainment and the ability to perform the task required. However, when it comes to helping and human relationships we all know the world is full of 'experts' who cannot relate to a paper bag. We also know – many of us – that a messy life, such as the one we lead, is no handicap and may even be a positive advantage in helping the client. Knowledge, let alone educational qualifications, is an unreliable indicator of anything except that somebody knew a lot about something once – when they took the exam.

This is not to disparage learning, knowledge or theoretical understanding; simply that it is an unreliable guide when it comes to predicting how successful someone will be in 'helping the client'. They are also jealous gods when it comes to worshipping, because they are no more than false idols. Those involved in exploring experience and meaning should not fall victim to worshipping sculpted idols and reciting dogma without thought to the consequences.

2. **Skill demonstrations:** this is a way of attempting to relate qualifications to a supposed level of skill. Many training programmes talk a lot about 'skill demonstration', but what they usually mean is skill practice and video work included as part of the overall assessment of the practitioner in training. Practice is also divorced from the actualities of the live situation with a client. Client videos come close, but it is difficult to assess how far the video operation skews the result. The practitioner's 'ability' remains largely measured by other things, such as essays. This is qualification by educational attainment disguised within a range of other elements.

The argument advanced for this approach is that it is the combination of knowledge, practice and theoretical understanding that is actually being taken into account and that it is this combination that gives a more reliable guide to a good practitioner. This may be so, but not if they are forever separated from one another and decided by individuals other than those undertaking the programme. A basic contradiction in such measures is that those who decide upon the competence of the trainees never have to subject themselves<sup>18</sup> to the same test conditions that the trainees undergo.

An important aspect of any skilled performance is for the practitioner to know how they measure it for themselves: what their own internal picture of such a performance consists of, looks like and feels like. This means learning how to look at your own practice with some detachment, and with the help and support of peers who are similarly engaged. When someone else is the arbiter of the standard and your own view is only incidental to the result you will be given, there is no great encouragement to disclose what you think about your own performance.

If there is no culture of actively striving to win a realistic sense of what a good performance means for each person, given who they are, how they see the enterprise and the context in which they expect to operate, then a skilled performance is only a form of driving test. Once on the road, the newly qualified practitioner not only has it all to learn via experience, but also has to learn how to frame that experience into what constitutes a good performance for the circumstances. Of course supervision is the place where, once again, they are all too likely to be given the way to look at matters. Such forms of training are more a matter of generating veneration and obedience to the existing norms of those who control the practice rather than fostering an intelligent self-critical reflection by those who are entering practice. In most forms of practice, it is this kind of outdated respect for the prior, the traditional and the past-based way of doing things that fetters them from responding to the needs of the present. But it does ensure that those entering the profession are duly subservient to those in charge of it and by a process of time-served pass on this need for deference to the next generation of entrants.

One important difficulty about skill demonstration as a guide to the practical reliability of performance is the fact that there are any number of gifted communicators who can use those skills for any purpose they choose and 'the benefit of the client' may or may not be one of them. In other words, it is not just a matter of *whether* you have the right skills, but *how* you use them, *when*, *for whose benefit and in what context*. There are brilliant individuals who fall into this category – certain politicians and celebrities come to mind. Here, it is not their skills that are in doubt but the use to which they put them. Assessing what constitutes a skilled performance has also to look at the values and purposes that inform those skills. The skilled socio-path is well represented on our TV screens regularly.

Another major handicap of this method, even when applied in pure form, is that simply being able to demonstrate that you can do something under test conditions once, is no reliable guide to the same individual being able to replicate it under a wide range of circumstances and with a vast array of folk.

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<sup>18</sup> Nor do they have to demonstrate their own capabilities to write essays under test conditions. The assumption is that they did in the past, but that is not necessarily the case, since many staff arrive into training via a number of routes that are not necessarily aligned to the ones they put their charges through.

There is an attempt in skill-based forms of qualification to glide over the fact that a human relationship is not akin to painting a wall, building a cupboard or fitting a bathroom. It is a unique, unrepeatable experience and no amount of training can prepare anyone for most, let alone all, they will have to meet – thank God. Such a dilemma is hidden from view by all the efforts that go into attaining accurate measures of skill demonstration: not that they don't have their uses but they need to be preserved for the purposes for which they are designed.

3. **Experience:** what experience, how long, with whom and how relevant to now and the future? These are just the beginnings of the minefield of questions when taking experience as a suitable criterion for assessing an individual as competent to practise or able to perform a skilled helping role. As we all know, there are all too many of us roaming about with the same experience we have had a hundred times over, of making the person fit the model we have of how they should be and what they should do. The unreflective helper is often doing little more than offering the same solution that once fitted somebody a long time ago. Once more, it is not that experience is unimportant; most practitioners will readily acknowledge that it is reflecting upon experience that deepens the richness of practice and that more may well be gained this way than can be attained from training.

In the past, this method of development was recognised by those involved in many of the activities that went on to become professions. They used this very method as the basis for preparing people to take up the role. It can be termed 'sitting by Nelly', an apprenticeship model, or a form of learning how to become a reflective practitioner. Whatever term is used, the power of reflection upon experience with skilled support is a fundamental influence upon the evolution of the novice practitioner into the artist. However, there is no guarantee that the practitioner will undertake such a commitment, that the reflection will provide the kind of setting where deeper issues surface, doubts are raised or that the personal inquiry into what is going on will be faced. The helper may not seek it out, the person chosen may be inept at offering it, however well meaning.

When someone claims to have wide experience it is no guide to the quality, only the amount of experience they have acquired. Of course, asking questions and probing helps, but that would help any system of selection. The consumer of the service can begin to get a sense of how practitioners describe their experience by talking to them. A good practitioner should be able to account for their practice in some sort of coherent way, describe what influences they have absorbed, what styles of approach they have used and it should sound like it 'lives' rather than like a catalogue of the latest fashionable seminar programmes.

4. **Past performance:** when we come to something like past performance as a way of gaining a reputation, we move out of the land of qualification and into the land of committed practice. Marks & Spencer didn't get to where they are overnight and even when they make disastrous mistakes they are very good at minimising them – by prompt action that retains the confidence of their constituency. Managing decline however, is another matter (the current issue facing Marks & Spencer) and any well-established provider will have periods of healthy crisis. However, few practitioners want to think this sentence should apply to them.

What such a reputation depends on is a complex range of factors that add up to maintaining a watchful eye upon those who matter – i.e. the customers. Organisations that depend upon their cumulative reputation create not only a *perception* but also an *experience* of reliability about what they will offer, a commitment about how it will be offered and a willingness to respond when the customer is not satisfied. Such a file of testimonials takes a long time to build up because mistakes will inevitably be made on the way and valuable clients lost. As someone once said, every lesson you learn in this work usually costs you a good client i.e. an interesting encounter.

5. **Response over time:** a long lasting reputation can only be built on consistency over time with the client range. Immediately, it is possible to see that this is at odds with the spirit of the age that wants instant guarantees of credibility and instant solutions. But there is a place for those who are more interested in the longer-term response. When intentions are clearly expressed with a commitment to offering the help as well as we can and a willingness to learn from our mistakes, it does not have to bring litigation and writs upon our heads.



### Managing Dysfunction and Failure

As we know only too well, in the helping world there are any number of self-deceiving individuals who genuinely believe their motives are pure gold (and they usually are) and have absolutely no insight into their unaware exploitation of the client. They would be affronted at any suggestion that their efforts are informed by mixed motives of any kind, let alone with a determination to create a dependency upon themselves. For, however we might not like the idea and disapprove of the practice of those going about the world seeking to compensate for a deficiency in themselves by helping others, who isn't guilty, in part, of the same slur? At what point does it become possible to decide a person is now dysfunctional enough for a ban to be put on their activities?

In extreme cases of misconduct all are likely to agree, but most problems in helping are not that gross, are not that obvious and require nuances and subtleties of distinction that codes pretend to cover but which, in the end, can provide almost no helpful guidance. All helpers have mixed motives and those motives are mixed differently at different times. In addition, since we all have mixed motives what are my motives for judging yours as *too* mixed? In other words, no one can exempt themselves from the human condition to stand apart from it and judge someone else. Well, in fact we can and we do, and when others do it to us we do not like it. It is something that by and large civilised societies rightfully put a ban on – not the right to make the judgements but the right to act upon them. In that way we can believe what we like and even say it, but most of us realise that some of our most determined judgements are just that, determined, not by a purely rational assessment of things, but by other less pure and altogether quaintly mixed influences.

There are times when helping will go wrong for all kinds of reasons to do with the mix of the people, their personal histories, the entanglements that occur and so on. Such difficulties are often the source of learning, if there is a spirit of inquiry and openness that has been fostered in the relationship itself. Where there is a real failure of commitment or a mistake in the style or form of help offered, there is much to learn, but the learning will almost certainly be obscured the more formally it is dealt with.

Working with failure is so often a part of the helper's role, or the rehabilitation of failure – the encouraging and enabling of the client to come to terms with some supposed failure, to view it not simply as a wound to be repeatedly revisited, but a potential source of recovery to move on with. However, it appears that the helper, once in practice, is exiled from having to apply this to himself. Once in practice, mistakes are not to occur for fear of... Such a censorious atmosphere of fear and mistrust ensures that difficulties are minimised, tensions eased away and the downright difficult moments are couched in psychological interpretations that appear to address the issues but which only leave them to re-appear later. Rules generate the problem. This is not to say that nothing matters but that the rules don't help, they simply punish people. When there is a willingness to be open to what is going on and a willingness to work with the consequences and implications, then the process is akin to:

*There will inevitably be 'things' which should not be going on and when there are 'things' which should not be going on, the first duty of all concerned is to check if they are and if they aren't, to be vigilant until they are. Fear produces the very phenomena it sets out to remove.*

### Regulation of Helpers

Most activities between one citizen and another are regulated by law and work well enough. As society changes, the law needs to be updated. Few people would oppose the improvements (which many people think have not gone far enough) in bringing the activities of stalkers, for example, closer to legal prosecution. But, in the end, it is not usually the threat of legal prosecution that stops the single-minded dedicated individual: it simply acts as a warning to the over-inflamed individual who thinks twice. The fewer the laws, the more law abiding the people: the more laws, the more strictly they have to be enforced and the more fear rules.

The law exists for such purposes and understandably people are cautious about invoking the law because of the value we attach to personal freedom. The route to totalitarianism is clear to all and begins with first subtle and then more overt forms of interference with the personal freedom of the citizen to act on their own behalf. But what happens when one citizen interferes with the liberties of another?

If you believe one person purchasing the services of another is somehow by definition in a position of vulnerability, and has with the very act of paying invalidated their own critical faculty, then you might well believe policing helping activities is essential. If, however, you recognise that the need for help takes many forms and many people who benefit from help are quite capable of making informed judgements of the suitability of the person they are employing, then policing the activity in the way the professional bodies are attempting to claim is not necessary. It is much more to do with fear and conformity, of displacing the distress that goes with acting as an independent individual alongside another such individual in a contract of mutually agreed purposes.

“All parents are self-accredited Fs of the personal growth of their children. A sobering thought. It is above all an area where self-accreditation is preceded by abysmally inadequate self-preparation, in most cases. All the fuss about accrediting professional helpers does often seem to me to be a rather disgraceful displacement of attention away from the real problem – which is how to introduce courses, programmes, workshops into secondary, higher and adult education that will raise consciousness in our society about child raising practices.” John Heron, *Dimensions of Facilitator Style*, p41, University of Surrey, 1977.

So knowing how to say the right thing and even meaning it, is no guarantee of a helper being useful, only a demonstration of their ideological purity, which is not a good guarantee of being successful in the ‘live’ situation and the pragmatics of the human condition. This is a minefield: not easily decided about and not decided about in one way.

### **The Complaints Machinery**

Complaining seems to become progressively more complex and unrewarding the more professional the body to be tackled. Complaining to Michael, the washing machine repairman, is easy. I refuse to pay the bill until I am satisfied. I have resort to the Trade Descriptions Act. I can seek help from the trading standards authority. I have a number of routes open. When it comes to my consumer rights they may be far from perfect but they are there and they do give me some protection. When it comes to influencing the work of professionals, it is altogether more complex and arduous. With Michael there is likely to be a face-to-face attempt to get some progress if something is not satisfactory. With my Doctor, especially if the Doctor is a consultant, it is likely that the threat of a formal complaint will be necessary before there is a response (and a wearisome long time to get any satisfaction, which may only be a wish to be ‘heard’). With many lawyers it is the same and then it is not likely that the complaint will get very far. Additionally, my complaint with Michael is likely to be very specific. The part was incorrectly selected, or installed.

When it comes to helping and complaining, how do we establish that one is exploiting the other when both parties freely enter into the relationship? How do we ensure that the claims made by either side are valid when there is no one else to verify them and no attributable result to judge? For a client to say, ‘I received no help whatever from you and felt that you had no interest in me at all,’ may be an accurate subjective claim; however it doesn’t constitute grounds for judging the helper to be ineffective in other cases or at other times. Often, in the end, it is some version of some such claim that a disaffected client is making; that the help they received was not what was expected, did not bring about the results they had been led to believe and that they felt in some way cheated by the experience for which they had paid a sum of money.

When there is no evidence and no recourse beyond making judgements of what hasn’t been done adequately, or when the whole enterprise rests upon the faith and trust of the two people involved, when things do go wrong, it is likely to be characterised as a failure of ‘sensitivity’ on the part of the helper, some moral lapse, or some deliberate attempt to exploit the supposed vulnerabilities of the client. The client is thus painted as someone who, when it comes to washing machines, gets no such protection, who can manage the affairs of being a citizen in the world, but in a personal relationship they have chosen to enter into freely and can leave at will, they are entitled to reduce the practitioner to paralytic fear by threatening to bring action against them. Action that, whatever the result, only serves to contaminate the practitioner’s reputation.

### **A ‘Worthy Occupation’**

Of all the activities that might be measured and apportioned, this business of helping is full of pitfalls. One way of dealing with all this ambiguity and ambivalence is to put together some aggregate of ways to ‘measure’ the helper’s abilities and regard that as ‘the means necessary’.

This is a kind of 'dog's breakfast' approach that satisfies no one but which leaves everyone willing to give up the arduous discussion as to whether we need anything comprehensive at all. Why not leave helpers open to make claims that are sound – or checkable – about what they can and can't do and leave it up to the disaffected clients to pursue their complaints, first of all informally and, if that doesn't work, then with the usual remedies? The Trade Descriptions Act is there for a purpose.

The point to be made is that Michael doesn't parade himself as a professional, though he acts with great integrity and a real sense of dedication that would leave most professionals standing. Being 'professional' is supposed to be synonymous with high standards and dedication and we all know that it means no such thing; it is often a by-word for prevarication, self-justification and delay in dealing openly with the difficulties experienced by those served. Michael does not need to dignify his services with recourse to claiming to be part of a profession: he has a worthy occupation. Help could be of the same kind: an occupation that has high standards and open claims to practice that are capable of being acted against by dissatisfied customers. The paraphernalia that goes with describing an occupation as a profession does more to enhance the ego and social status of those making the claim than giving any real benefit to those in receipt of the services.

If I cannot meet you in the work without having all this professionalisation behind me what has the work come to be about? If I pretend it is merely a requirement that 'they' (the authorities) demand of me what does that say about my commitment to help people find their own way and stand by their own position if I cannot do that for myself? If I see it all as something and nothing, then how committed am I to enabling people think through the consequences of their choices?

However we look at it, going along with a system that you do not believe in is not merely hypocritical but undermines the base upon which you stand in order to help the client. Unless, of course, you have by this point arrived at the situation where you believe we all have to compromise and this is just another one. The compromise that this represents, however, is quite massive in terms of its implications for personal stance, the social order and the future relationship of people in a society where such divisions are fast collapsing. Nor is it an instrumentally useful tool to ensure that a number of necessary aspects of supporting practice are in place (a commonly proposed view).

### **The Human Condition**

You may be as well qualified as you like in whatever therapeutic strategies you have been trained in, but that doesn't have any necessary relationship to having a wise understanding of the human condition – even your own. This may be a very troubling and disquieting fact about all this, but it is the case. All appeals to qualification, in the end, are based on hiding this fact. The practitioner wants the client to be reassured that they are potent enough to enable the client to get where the client wants to go. The client doesn't want to face the fact that the person helping them may well have no more genuine 'expertise' than anyone else off the street because that would be too unbearable. The realisation is that the human condition is something none of us can escape and is something none of us has actually become 'qualified' in knowing how to deal with. We manage it, better or worse.

Insight and practice help. Training can make a huge difference in the eradication of some of the clumsier forms of intruding upon the realities of another, but it does little to enable a person choose to be with another – perhaps the most essential pre-condition in my view. What it fosters is a belief in technique in exchange for 'being with': the illusion that technique alone will be enough, that length of training should be sufficient and professional approval the guarantee.

The danger is always of the practitioner (of any kind of applied activity) turning the client's difficulties into the kind they are interested in wanting to solve – whether the practitioner is a car salesman, architect, solicitor, health care worker, therapist or counsellor. Helping is always in danger of making itself more complex than it need, and of looking for more to do than the client is seeking. Newly qualified practitioners then find themselves busy attempting to assist their clients' approach the dilemmas of a new century, to face novel and previously undreamed of dilemmas from a base of practice that is itself anachronistic. How reassuring would most customers find it to buy goods from a source that prides itself on its own obsolescence? It is not unlike being offered a gas mantle in place of an electric light bulb on the grounds that, 'Yes, we do know that the world uses bulbs now,' the sale person says, 'and we do know that things have changed, but we still prefer to have our own rooms lit with these other things, wouldn't you? How many would you like?'

In terms of what is being sold – ideas about how to manage in the world, understand human frailties, deal with difficult situations and so on – the comparison is all too exact. Here the helper is busy pretending to have both feet in the real world of change and uncertainty, whilst all the time resting in the occupational assurance of a well regulated and exclusive form of licensing system that protects their own livelihood at a time when everyone else's has gone into free fall!

*All this is part of the professionalisation issue we have been tracking throughout these essays.*

It all helps to generate a sense of self-importance for those who are connected to the activity, a feeling that they are part of something terribly serious, and that the incompetents are being weeded out to make the profession more wholesome and attractive to the clients who will feel reassured that those who are members are safe practitioners. Well, safe they may be, but courageous they won't be and innovative they won't be, nor will they be much into the novel, the imaginative or the risky. With indemnity insurance and personal alarms to hand, the new professional counsellor is like a well-armoured knight waiting to be ambushed by the Baron's men on the way to the tournament.

More and more, the aspiration of the original humanistic impulse where counselling skills and other interpersonal training programmes were accessible to all and not the preserve of any one professional group, has given way to the specialisation of function as the practice of psychotherapy has claimed an entitlement to the exclusive use of these skills. But, however hard such a claim can be made and however far the impulse of humanistic psychology gets deformed – as it adjusts to the academic and professional requirements that are required for it to become conventionally acceptable – the human condition will not easily be compressed into the norms of any professional body. It may turn out to be a mercy for the rest of us when psychotherapy is so established a profession that it is no longer of any real consequence to those of us who are interested in developmental alliances and ways of working with people that are much more openly negotiated. Similarly, once psychotherapists have fallen under their own spell of believing that they are the only group licensed to understand and operate upon the psyche, it will leave the rest of us free to explore without fear of being contaminated by such labels ourselves.



## Chapter 9: Issues for Practitioners in a Peer Paradigm

### ‘Expertise’

Most clients want a kind of help that most helpers wish to change as a condition of helping. In other words, many helpers often set out to retrain the client into the norms of the role they wish the client to play; the role to which they have been trained to respond. By and large, counsellors are more fascinated with their process than is the average client, who simply wants help in getting sorted. This is one of the great dilemmas for the new practitioner. The client may have misconceptions about the nature of what they truly need (as defined by the counsellor, we note), so they are gently, or more abruptly, encouraged to take a different view of the matter. Subtle forms of re-education begin with the first session.

Having been a client of many types of practitioner and many levels of expertise, it is interesting to note that those who are most at ease with their practice have rarely set about changing my view, as the client, of what I am seeking. They rarely made much about what training they had: they didn’t need to. They had a modest sense of confidence that was quite apparent. The more conventional the practitioner, the more uncreative the therapist, the more I have been persuaded to reframe my dilemma into one that they would wish me to have in order for me to benefit from what they wish to give. This is often accompanied with lengthy explanations of how the theory in which they had been trained so lavishly meant that this was the procedure to follow. This is about convincing me of the need to find some authority *outside* myself to trust in, in order to relieve myself of the burden of working out a solution to things for myself (with the help of someone else to be sure, but *my* solution). In other words, they neatly illustrated they knew no better than I did, internally. They had exchanged the freedom of personal responsibility for the assurance of some external authority that one way or another ought to be good enough to convince me.

I have experienced some formidable help in a very short time from some very gifted people, who could take my starting point and work from theirs, enabling us to truly meet. I have received some routine help from some very well qualified people who had a limited range of options to offer and knew it, but did an honourable job. I have also received some very poor help from individuals wholly unaware of their own attempts to condition me (as a client) to their own way of working, all of whom were ‘qualified’ up to the hilt.

I have occasionally spent a large part of my time finding ways to resist the underlying norms of what it ‘meant’ for me to have the issue I was bringing and how it meant ‘this or that’ requirement and commitment, if I was to expect any progress. This was usually from people who were very keen to impress me with the extent of their training – who with and for how long. This is reputation by association: ‘I trained with this person, who we all know to be brilliant, ergo, by association, I am also brilliant.’ We are not talking medical diagnosis here; we are talking about wrestling with dilemmas of the human condition.

### Appropriate Help

Many folk will not want, or benefit from, long-term help of a psychotherapeutic kind, or even from what is often termed ‘counselling’ today. There are many reasons for this besides those of the cost and the time required. Different people will have different reactions to the help being offered, depending on the circumstances, the issue being presented and at different stages in their lives. These reactions might include any of the following:

1. They are not sufficiently practised in the art of talking to benefit from the way ‘therapy’ operates and the length of time it takes.
2. They are without a sufficiently coherent sense and experience of ‘self’ to know how to respond effectively to such a way of relating.
3. They are without a substantial opportunity of learning how to ‘be’ themselves and manage the level of attention that counselling and therapy requires and so work hard at becoming what they believe a model client ‘should’ be, when they could find more beneficial help far more quickly from other educational ventures, for example.

4. They do not have a strong enough sense of the value of working in the way counselling and therapy operate. They therefore go along with the activity only to find themselves increasingly unsure of its worth and begin to blame themselves when they believe it's not working.
5. They do not have a clear enough sense of the possibilities and limitations that therapeutic-style help can open up.
6. They are sceptical of what therapy claims to be able to do and have an unwillingness to blame themselves when it doesn't succeed.
7. They are at odds with the 'personalising' and 'psychologising' of personal maladies at the expense of other forms of understanding how individuals come to have the difficulties that they do.
8. They will be looking for developmental and educational opportunities, rather than focusing on the past and the problems that live there.

There are large numbers of people for whom therapy is little more than an expensive emotional finishing school, a fashionable activity. This does nothing to detract from the knowledge that there is a deep need for development and emotional release; however, therapy will not be the way forward for most people or for society. One of its many drawbacks is that it individualises issues and dilemmas. Whilst I am in favour of people taking responsibility for their own lives, it also has limitations. It does however fit neatly into a Thatcherite and 'Third Way' view of life; a view of life and a philosophy that discourages the individual from thinking through the political and social aspects of how they come to have the dilemmas they do and the problems they have. It makes the individual the locus of the problems and leaves the social world out of the equation – or very nearly.

'Psychologising' politics is not sufficient: it is not all a problem of the individual. It is largely the institutional frameworks and the power relationships of our social and political agencies that drive many people to have the kind of problems they do in the first place. Much therapy ignores this and when it doesn't, it still finds it difficult to give recognition to it in the therapy session. Less therapy and more political analysis might move all of us on a lot faster. In some ways therapy can be seen as a retreat from strong political engagement and an increasing preoccupation with the minutiae of its own vested interests.<sup>19</sup> As it gets more and more satisfied with itself and its own status, it has retreated from attempting to have a wider radical influence upon our social world. Social action is out and private psychological exploration and explanation is 'in'.

### Separation

A radical view, such as the one outlined in this book, has its costs and consequences, as the author has had to discover. There is also much to learn simply because this way of attempting to offer an openness of meeting with people is relatively rare. For example, how do we deal with 'our' relationship when one of us is helping the other? How far are we able to allow the helping part to be managed amongst the other ways in which we might relate or come to relate? Can we bracket it off in some mutually understood way that does not permanently create a dependence of the one upon the other or elevates the one above the other? Can we manage our other forms of meeting, either together or with others, as well as having a time set aside when the helping is going on? Not so, in the view of the burgeoning profession. The deadly virus of 'transference' will infect everything and destroy the power of the helping relationship.

One of the many arguments advanced to promote this total separation, this form of quarantine, is that the client in the privacy and separateness of a one-to-one relationship with their particular helper might come to think they hold a 'special' position in the helper's orbit. This may lead them to feel deeply hurt, envious, resentful or jealous to discover they are but one of a number of people being helped. Such a realisation and the effects of losing the illusion that they are 'special' would necessarily have a debilitating effect upon the helping and the client would, in short, not be able to manage. It is argued that the effects of the client realising that they are simply meeting a person like themselves, someone who has a world of connections like themselves, a place in the world, other relationships and a not altogether model life would undermine the power of the helping.

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<sup>19</sup> See James Hillman and Michael Ventura, *We've had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy – And the World's Getting Worse*, Harper Collins, London, 1993.

(One wonders what power helping of this kind has if it needs all this protection.) The client must be given to believe that the helper and their world have no place of overlap, let alone meeting, outside the time they spend together in the mysterious activity of helping.

The purpose, of course, is to promote a version of helping and a mystique attaching to those who do it that makes up for the lack of any real difference between helping and other forms of being of assistance to other people. But when you want people to pay you as a professional, you have to have some means of distinguishing what you do from some commonplace activity. You have to ensure that the client believes that what they are getting is indeed something 'special', even if you don't want them to come to believe they are!

Finding ways to manage these undoubted complexities is not to be undertaken; they are banished, *verboden*. This kind of exclusivity and separation induces a deep sense of pride in those who adopt it. It marks them out as the elect. It ensures their caring is so far removed from having any traffic with the ordinary world of meeting and contact that they must therefore be special themselves. The activity, which is essentially a humble one, is also made to seem deeply difficult because it stands in need of such special recognition and condition.

### **The New Paradigm**

The helping world, as we have already seen, is rapidly professionalising itself in order to decide who should be competent to do what. The fear that is inspiring this move is, in part, about paradigms of belief in relation to what helping should be and how it should be offered. The paradigm of a humanistic and developmental practitioner would have a very different starting point about how and who should do what.

If you regard other people as capable (to different degrees) of choice, self-direction and self-determination; if you believe that they can enter into a relationship for the purposes of change as an adult who does not lose their capacity to know what they can and will do and what they do not wish to do the moment they meet a 'counsellor'; if you believe that the essence of the helping relationship lies in the quality of meeting that develops; if you believe that it is a joint endeavour, then we have a paradigm in which many of the concerns of traditional practitioners have little place.

The 'vulnerable, dependent client' is not someone who is much recognised by the developmental counsellor, nor is a dependency-driven transference relationship fostered either, though elements of that will be present to a degree depending upon all manner of factors. The client is viewed as someone inherently capable of making wise choices; indeed, if they aren't then why begin the enterprise at all? The way to wise choices is often through errors or mistakes, and staying in a counselling relationship that isn't working may be one of them. In other words, people, by and large, do not need protecting from themselves or anyone else. They need to be given every encouragement to remain alert and to develop a trust in their experience.

In this new paradigm the individual is regarded as capable of being:

- Self-determining
- Self-contracting
- Self-responsible
- Self-directin
- Self-initiating
- Self-nurturing
- Collaborativ
- Capable of construing meaning and communicating it.

People are participating in their world. They are not 'objects' of other people's attention, but co-creators of the web of life. Such a view has a number of implications for drawing up codes of practice and for looking at the whole issue of accreditation.



If the practitioner is open to the client then they will have no vested interest in keeping the client in the relationship the moment the client begins to express disaffection with it, though they will want to confront the potential for sabotage and avoidance that may be at work. These are prudent decisions that have to be made in the light of the people, the circumstances and the work they are doing together. Once you have adopted a developmental paradigm, the fear-induced, distress-dependent anxieties about what might or might not happen are replaced by a set of concerns. These concerns are related to questions concerning how clearly and how fully we need to outline how we offer the relationship, in such a way that the client is able to have a realistic understanding of the nature of what we are likely to be doing.

### Self Directed Learning

Self-selection, which this clearly recognises, is the client's moving force, removes the uncommitted and by definition attracts the self-responsible. It encourages those in search of greater autonomy and interest in self-expression and is clearly at odds with those seeking a merely conventional approach. This does not mean that you cannot offer to meet someone who is being 'sent' to be 'fixed', but you do have some work to do to know how to offer yourself and how to encourage him or her to take up the offer. It indicates a discernible difference from an old paradigm approach:

- There is no formal title to acquire or be given and therefore no profession to protect, develop, judge or control – either way
- This is more of a community of peers working things out.

A self-directed learner, for example, has nothing to gain by deluding themselves as being in any position other than the one they are in – and they won't know that without the benefit of sensitive, aware peers exploring issues together. It is not something that can be done alone. Of course collusion occurs and is always possible, but there is a commitment to remaining alert and open to inquiry into what is happening. This is rather different from the conventional approach to accreditation and status where the collusion is so overt and manifest that it is invisible. The whole conventional approach is a conspiracy of collusion for those not yet accredited to invalidate their experience and knowledge unless and until it conforms to the requirements that others set, and until they approve. And whilst "many self-accredited facilitators also have socially approved qualifications of one sort or another in more or less relevant or related domains" (Heron), it is also the case that:

"... to deify and canonise innovators and to institutionalise formal and restrictive training programmes around their achievement, is a practice full of internal contradiction. It both honours creative innovation (in the past) and at the same time sets about ensuring that there will be no more of it in the present and the future, since it sets up the very sorts of rigidities which the founder had to reject and ignore in order to get his new ideas conceived and launched. It is surprising there is so much of it about. It also rather obviously invalidates and puts down the students and followers by implying that they are in a definitely inferior league of creativity. Unfortunately, the innovator themselves often initiate the dogmatic restrictions. On the one hand this can be seen as an understandable concern to protect their new ideas from premature distortion before they have had an opportunity to be tried out over time in a consistent and coherent form. On the other hand, the restriction often presents itself as a defence against the innovator's unacknowledged anxiety about the wider reaches of human experience which the ideas do not cover..." John Heron, *Dimensions of Facilitator Style*, pp33-34, University of Surrey, 1977.

### Impersonal Service and Anonymous Clients

I believe that the more impersonally you work and the more anonymous your clientele, the more it is likely that one day you will have something unpleasant to deal with. In Gabrielle Syme's (a past chair of the BAC) article in a BAC journal, it is possible to see something of where therapists reckon their work might be heading. The 'contract' she outlines and the need for devices of protection, like personal alarms, conjures up a vision of the besieged helper surrounded with the armour of contracts, devices and alarms – all as the necessary *minimum* protection from the potentially life-threatening client. Such a response is not unlike defensive medicine and holds a similar view of the client as a potential enemy who might infect the helper.

If you want to be 'special' and have 'expertise' then you are inviting people to sue you for your perceived failure to provide it – especially if that expertise is almost impossible to quantify, or to make apparent. So the very impulse to make counselling a 'profession' and to keep others 'out' creates the very climate for those who make use of its services to expect something that it largely cannot provide, and then to feel the disappointment of their unfulfilled hopes all the more keenly. Furthermore, in the future, people will no longer be so patient as to wait for the full seven years for psychoanalysis to work before they might begin 'marching with their feet'.

The fiction is maintained that socialising with clients, having any ordinary human contact, is to be disavowed because of the turbulence and upset it causes to the dynamics of the helping relationship. The promotion of such a form of 'role distance' and aura production is adopted straight from the circles of psychoanalytic life. It creates a further separation between helper and helped that in any small town or social community is likely to be continually under threat of breakdown. Much time and a good deal of sweet agony is thus spent in attempting to construct and artificially maintain an impressive degree of distance in order to help preserve the aura and the mystery of something that is essentially as old as time. But to create a profession such a mystery needs to be present and if it isn't, it has to be manufactured.

A peer-based way of looking at the activity of helping has little place for the kinds of manoeuvres that professionalisation requires. This does not mean that there is no room for special skills and particular types of other intervention, but they are to be taken up only when ordinary caring breaks down.

### **The Dilemmas of a Peer Paradigm**

Once the educational event is over and the participant leaves and goes out into the wider world to practice, how do they make sense of what they find if they have undertaken a commitment to a peer learning model?

- What are the implications for the future practice of those who have undertaken a programme using a peer-learning model?
- How does their educational experience then match, or not, the requirements of future practice?
- How far are such considerations surfaced in the programme they are undertaking?
- How far does a programme based on the underlying principles of peer learning, for example, manage the discord between its own view of the educational enterprise, the capabilities of those involved and the much more restricted and externally measured standards used by traditional programmes and those who emerge from them?
- How does someone committed to a peer model of their practice come to terms with the centralised conformist and largely fear-based requirements of professional bodies with their implicit view of the client as the sleeping enemy, someone who at any moment may visit disaster upon the practitioner?

There can be a deep unease at all the paraphernalia of professionalism that the novice practitioner is pressured to sign up to, if for no other reason than uncertainty about the alternatives. It does not take long, nor many comments from others about indemnity insurance, clients suing practitioners, needing to be registered and all the intimidating phrases that help create a climate of insecurity and even fear that awaits those outside the regulatory bodies, before the novice views practice from a peer paradigm as akin to an occupational death wish.

The whole thrust of professionalisation is to undermine the peer nature of the relationship and to elevate the practitioner *over* the client. It is this basic separation of roles that, on the one hand, provides the professional with their justification to be seen differently, to be regarded as 'superior' (not simply for the particular purpose at hand, but usually to enjoy other, associated social advantages, too), and, on the other, to be open to the possibility of accusations of negligence, misconduct and so on.

*Once I am practising on you, you need protecting from me and I may well need protecting from you.* Difference of an altogether divisive kind becomes more and more the defining nature of the activity and of those taking part. All this is likely to be a long way from the ethos of the person who has a peer view of human relations. A practitioner who sees the enterprise of helping, for example, as two adults together negotiating what they do, how they do it and where they hope to get to, will not feel at ease with the sort of 'professional' relationship described above. Holding a peer model of practice, however, may still leave a practitioner feeling obliged to join a professional association out of insecurity rather than out of any deep agreement to the codes of practice and the strict regulation of an activity that is so based upon human meeting.

This is not then something of an academic dilemma: it is a deeply troubling prospect for those leaving long-term programmes that have been based upon a peer model. It is also something of a dilemma for others on traditional programmes where ideas about person-centredness or collaborative relationships have been explored to any depth. The way in which 'professional' bodies seek to regulate the way helping is conducted in practice is a world away from the way it is described by great practitioners who are frequently used as models of inspiration on training programmes.

### **The Lure of the Professional Body**

The difficulty for an individual with such a concern, of course, is that they are in doubt and the one thing that professional bodies have done away with is doubt. They have already done the thinking for you. Of course, there are always reflective practitioners within professions willing to become troublesome to the conformist norms that all professions rely upon as the mechanism for regulating their membership. But in the main, the novice practitioner is full of all kinds of uncertainties and the professional organisation is a solid and respectable repository of the answers and remedies to many of them. Why wrestle with the loneliness of working it out, with the perplexing ambiguities of practice or the uncertainties of where the limits are and what is the permissible range of responses when there is a body already waiting to tell you?

At the same time, there are all too many other fledgling practitioners flocking together and forming a well-trodden path of membership, accreditation and registration to create an almost overwhelming feeling that this is 'right', rather than that this is no more than an expression of what it is – people seeking the safety of belonging to a solid body of respectable opinion in exchange for freedom of thought and action. For the price of giving up the bother to work it out, the individual is enabled to enjoy a certain kind of relief from the anxiety of uncertainty. Underneath this, too, there is the lure that membership of the professional body will somehow help the process of bringing clients to the new practitioner's door. Somewhere down the line of course, the complexities of practice, a certain kind of meeting, a difficulty that nags away, or a challenge from conscience may well begin to remind the practitioner that if they really endorse the idea of people being capable of self-direction, able to learn to choose and work things out together, then there is something deeply troubling about all this fencing in and prescribing out.

The thoughtful practitioner begins to realise that what began as a decision to save themselves has been a decision where they have lost themselves and with it their autonomy and their right to act as the situation demands. They are, then, left with a set of codes and regulations that define what may or may not happen well in advance of the arrival of the client. They are restricted by codes which make clear the sanctions should you be minded to exercise the freedom to stray outside what is laid down. Membership rarely produces the clients, but it does bring about a sense of watchfulness, encourages a heightening of judgmental conviction about what others may be up to and fosters an atmosphere that all too easily breeds suspicion and resentment. Having paid their money, got their membership card, and finally duly registered (with all the costs that are required), well-armed helpers are still not guaranteed any more clients, only they are now more likely to be sued by those they already have. This is because they have set about to promote a claim to practise and a level of expertise that is largely misleading.

### **Creating a New Model**

In the face of all this, it is important to define what you do, to look for associations and affinities with like-minded groups and initiatives. It is equally important not to be pressurised into feeling you have to be part of something that you know in your bones is at odds with what you are about. Most professional organisations form for three reasons:

- For the status
- To control entry and manage the numbers (under the pretence of regulating the standards of education)
- To manage complaints and to maintain professional respectability.

The fear of complaints is almost beyond rational discussion in the therapeutic world, partly for the reasons already stated. But where is the place for humility, admission of error and redemption? The more obsessed with professional respectability an organisation becomes, the more draconian and paternalistic its stance is likely to be towards moral lapse and human failings. There is a lot of talk about the need for forgiveness and understanding when things go wrong in the counselling world, but my experience from having helped others and having been subjected to the process myself is that:

- The helping world has little, if any clue about how to follow its own procedures
- Redemption and forgiveness play no part in the show – it's about revenge and sanctions and how much and how far can we go
- Ostracism and anathema are the order of the day – 'let us not be contaminated with the sins of the outcast'.

### **Accountability**

An important aspect of the peer principle is a willingness to be accountable. If I am accountable to my peers, then I think a lot of practitioner concerns about other people's standards are largely taken care of.<sup>20</sup> I am in a position to raise issues of concern with you when we meet, and we have the benefit of other colleagues who may have greater clarity than either of us who are 'in it'. Clients knowing that they are protected in this way, too, might have some of their concerns and questions eased. Part of being a colleague in a shared enterprise is the willingness to discuss the development of practice issues together. The practitioner, the client and the commissioner (in the case of a contract arrangement) can then be assured that here is an organisation which is alive and interested in developing its services, not simply resting on the assurance that a distant body has accredited this person a long time ago.

The difference between exercising moral conscience and professional respectability is all here. The individual practitioner, who is concerned about the work and themselves in it, will meet many moral questions and issues of how far to go, what to do when... and so on. They cannot all be legislated for, or you end up with a code that is so restrictive that practically no risks can be taken beyond asking the person to sit down. If, on the other hand, you have few, if any, limitations upon practice, aren't you paving the way for all kinds of potential difficulties? My view is, of course not.

The people who get into difficulties will get into difficulties no matter what conditions are in place. The conditions will not remove the difficulties. They will only help them manage the difficulties as they arise, or create such a dilemma in them that when they have 'difficulties' they will act as if the conditions do not exist and hope they will not be discovered. When they are discovered, they will then know they are for the high jump. All the pent-up, unworked-out distress of the membership will then be focused upon them for letting the side down, being professionally inadequate, or whatever set of condemnations are imputed to the poor individual who is in a mess and who needs help.

You don't need to have many conditions before the practitioner knows that they are in the land of the conventional. All the radical interest in offering a relationship to another so that they can meet themselves and find ways to develop the qualities and resources that they need to make more productive steps in their own life is lost. People soon come to be viewed as having 'problems' and the counsellor's job is to 'fix' them. They are then to go away grateful and the world in which all that takes place remains unexamined.

### **Summary**

It is one thing, as we have seen, to undertake a programme using a peer learning model, to undertake a self and peer-assessment procedure and other collaborative forms of assessment and evaluation and yet another to translate that into the wider world. Anyone committed to the peer principle is unlikely to want others to adopt it uncritically. If adopting the peer principle means anything, it means recognising that it is a matter of personal conviction, an internalised commitment to the self-determination of one's self and others. A necessary corollary must be to extend that same 'right' to others who, in turn, come to find their own internal commitment to values they can articulate and stand by.

A peer commitment imposed on others would be an untenable contradiction.

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<sup>20</sup>This I think of as a displacement issue: a displacement of my own concerns about my own practice. A healthy interest in my own practice should be sufficient to keep me preoccupied to the exclusion of any prurient judgmental interest in the goings on of other colleagues.

Such a peer commitment is, therefore, something a person evolves a deeper commitment to, or not, by exercising their critical faculties and reflecting upon their own experience of how they believe activities (educational in the first instance, but then other activities too) should be conducted for the welfare of those involved.

Some may find the opportunity to work in the ways described earlier in these essays personally valuable and yet feel it has no place beyond the classroom and certain other particular activities. Others may become 'sold' on the idea of extending the peer principle elsewhere and to other situations. Some may find the peer principle so resonates with their own value-system it is merely an extension of a stance to the world they already hold and attempt to live by. They may thus recognise it as part of a way of 'being in the world', one that would certainly extend to issues of practice.

I have come to learn that the peer principle can be no more than a matter of convenience for some, a useful educational tool for others or a sensible pragmatic device for the training room and working in a one-to-one relationship for yet others. It is not always an approach that holds an overriding value when it comes to dealing with disaffection or difficulty. In part, this is because any peer relationship is always a joint responsibility. I cannot simply decide it was your fault if I didn't like what happened, or failed to get what I was hoping for. It seems that many find the peer approach attractive to enter into, but too arduous to maintain when there are issues to be faced. It is far easier then to revert to a traditional model, invoke the regulatory code and demand retribution for some supposed failing on the part of the practitioner for what had hitherto been a shared enterprise.

## Chapter 10: A Peer Principle Credo

This section is a personal statement; call it a *credo* if you will, about the peer principle, peer learning and the implementation of peer learning in an organisation. I invite readers to engage with this credo, which has arisen out of my strong personal commitment to the peer learning principle. My awareness and understanding of the importance of and the radical nature of this principle have grown and deepened over a number of years. I have gained much insight through many years of being a member of groups, both as facilitator and participant and, more recently, as a peer in Co-operative Inquiries.

It clearly makes sense to focus this exploration within an organisation with which I am concerned and deeply involved – the Oasis School of Human Relations. The development of Oasis as a peer learning organisation, the principles involved, its philosophy, the challenges and the possible implications are all described in a way which invites readers to engage and embrace the possibility of the peer learning organisation in other contexts too. The process through which Oasis has passed, and is still moving, is used to give depth and reality to the underlying principles and philosophy, hence some of the detail is connected very specifically to how these are being recognised and encouraged within the organisation. It is hoped, too, that this will encourage readers to consider transferring these ideas into their own environments.

Organisations are generally a long way from the place of being able to take on the degree of accountability needed within a peer learning organisation. However, one of the most common trends at the moment is to encourage people in organisations to be self-responsible and workers are being called upon to be accountable within teams. This implies an ability to disclose aspects of their own performances and to know how to talk about difficulties in a way that looks for solutions rather than attributing blame.

Throughout the document, I use the word 'I' to mean the person committed to the peer principle. I aspire to be the 'I' in question. I know I fail. Sometimes I know when I fail and sometimes I fail but only realise it in the aftermath. I will never be a true peer. I can only aspire to the demands of the calling. This is my present understanding of the nature of the calling. It is a contribution from one peer to my other peers: an invitation to dialogue and exploration.

### **Oasis: The Peer Learning Organisation**

The organisation exists in order for people to learn. Those of us employed by the organisation have things to learn, but this does not mean that the organisation exists for its members to learn what they want to learn or even what they decide they need to learn. The organisation has needs too. There are those in the organisation who will need to learn things and will not even know this unless they are given help and guidance. There are those who will only want to learn what they want to learn, which may well be at odds with what the organisation needs. Once inside the organisation, the individual has to acknowledge a commitment not only to her or his own learning and to others, but to the needs of the work itself as well.

Inevitably there will be times of conflict. It may be that, for my learning, a new programme needs to be developed. It may also be true that the organisation cannot afford to support a new initiative at such a time. In these ways I meet conflicts that are also part of my growth. Learning to work freely within the discipline of the choices I have made is also about growth. An organisation has a responsibility to manage its own survival. That can be put in jeopardy if people take upon themselves the right to learn only what they decide, at all costs, or if they are left to work out what they need to learn for themselves and cannot realistically be expected to know.

The work has four major elements:

1. Preparation
2. Activity
3. Reflection
4. Review.

Each individual will have a preference for different elements within this cycle. Each person has her or his own rhythm within the cycle. This rhythm applies also to the work itself and where one happens to be in the work.

**Personal rhythm:** each individual moves through this cycle at a different rate, with differing preferences for one stage over another. Some individuals love the *design stage* of the work: the preparation and exploration from the first seed idea, through the planning, to the initial piloting. Others learn and enjoy most when the *activity is underway*: from the immediacy of the challenges that no design can forestall – indeed which good design allows to emerge. Some individuals really inhabit the space of *reflection*: the period of deep consideration of all that it was when it is over. There is also the time to measure the conception against the work and learn what took place within the meeting of those elements and the group or the person with whom one is working. Periodic opportunities to take stock of whole phases of work, assignments, projects, time scales, are an important means of consolidating learning.

**Cyclical rhythm:** each person has a rhythm of development, stages of change and growth. I may be in a phase in which the focus seems drawn to consolidation of my experience – *reflection*. It may be that I need to plan ahead – *preparation*. A period of concentrated *activity* may mean I need to be attentive to the work itself and the process in a new way. And there are periods when assessment of a whole period is necessary – *review*. I need to sense where I am in any phase, as well as where I am inside my personal rhythm, in order that *I do not lose connection*. The intention is to develop my sense of connection with myself and, by association with others, to realise more of who I am and to radiate my **presence**.

Presence is a form of grace. It cannot be forced or willed. It is the reward. It comes from the work done and the authentic inheritance and ownership of self that arises. It is my connection with the divine. The more presence I have, the stiller I am and the more the work happens, rather than being driven or willed. It is not, in that sense, a personal possession: *it is acknowledged and witnessed by the other*. My process, my willingness to engage with my process before and in the presence of others and to take steps with them as witness, ensures that my presence is given recognition and that I do not bloom alone.

**Work rhythms:** in the way that each of us has a rhythm, so too the *work itself finds a cycle*. There are periods when the emphasis is on *preparing for a new phase* in my development. There are times when the concentration is upon providing the service I offer – *the activity*; stages of *reflection* and periodic occasions for *review*.

**The organisational rhythm:** the same cyclical flow is reproduced at an organisational level. It seems to be the case that the further away from ‘the process’ I get, the more lost I become. It also seems to be the case that the further up the organisation that the process is neglected, the further down the effects will be felt. If the organisation is not modelling what it holds to be important, it will be experienced throughout the organisation and beyond. If one part of the organisation is adrift it will have consequences for the rest, but not so serious or so long term. *There is a difference between momentarily losing track and systematically getting lost*. The checks on where I am ‘in the process’ are part of what helps ensure that the momentum of remaining within the process is never lost for so long that crisis develops.

### The Peer Learning Approach

I use some form of peer learning methods in almost all of the work I do. Such an approach requires and expects a *relatively high degree of individual responsibility* on my part in facilitating others who are being encouraged to manage themselves in their own learning. There are a number of elements that need to be considered in such a process; not all will be applicable at all times, but a working minimum must be present if I am to work in a way that I regard as humanistic and truly person-centred.

1. Firstly, there is a need to ensure a potential commitment to the principle of self and peer learning and assessment.
2. Secondly, to ensure there are enough forums that are frequent enough for those within them to remain sufficiently connected in order to reaffirm their commitment to the process.
3. *Review, mentoring and development time* are important aspects of this process, but they are important only as a consequence of the individual making their commitment to the process first.

I can avoid using a development plan facilitating my progress, if I choose. There are ways anyone can distort these mechanisms, but in the end, I know if I am cheating myself. Others will know too, if I am unable to account for myself in a way that indicates a living commitment to the process to which I say I subscribe. It is **my responsibility** to make my own arrangements to honour these commitments. It is up to me to account for these arrangements in the *peer and self-assessment process in which I am involved*. I invite my peers to help me clarify my direction and the balance of my arrangements. If this is done with regularity some balance is possible before I find myself adrift. The more adrift I get, the more likely it is that I will avoid the places where it will be possible to become challenged.

The danger is that my withdrawal then leaves others with concerns and no way to raise or express them. It is 'not their business'. There comes a point where they have to make it their business. If they do not, then the consequences may be a member of the community deepening a difficulty into a crisis that could have consequences for others. It is also likely to mean that discussion and comments are taking place outside of an arena where any useful result can be obtained. Gossip, the organisational undercurrent, then increases to no one's benefit. Undercurrents intensify and the risk of mishandling issues increases. Competition is likely to increase and defensiveness between all concerned strengthens. This is not healthy.

A peer learning organisation is founded on the ambition of working towards offering openness to those who find their way to its work. At its worst it creates something of a 'following', at its best it gives to many – and especially to those outside the usual power centres of our society – experiences that enable them to enter the conventional world and move on in their life. Some stay within the network that makes up the organisation of Oasis for a short time, others for longer: it is freely decided by each person.

The ground rules, the openness to challenge and the constant reassessment of oneself and one's development that is necessary if I am willing to do my own 'work' in the presence of peers and with visiting facilitators, provides a model that is a central safeguard for an organisation that is willing to include so many inter-relationships and overlapping roles in its work. There can be little potential for freedom and growth when members meet and relate across many arenas if there is an unwillingness to meet in a forum that is facilitated by someone from outside whose brief is to treat no one as exempt. It is the experience of being in this position for the last 15 years that strengthens my conviction that it is in the group of peers and with colleagues that I can, and need to, explore my vulnerabilities and my resistances.

I understand that this way of living out one's life is not for everyone. I recognise, too, that issues ordinarily screened out of social life, or managed with degrees of politeness: issues such as competition, favouritism and the question of, 'If all these people are special how special am I?' have to be faced with a degree of honesty and continuity. On the other side of this way of living is the requirement that my life has a semi-public aspect. I am never 'off duty'. If I regard myself as the motive force for what happens to me then I need to be willing to live out my values and beliefs in the same way as everyone else.

My personal journey and the issues that it raised are there for others to see. Eric Cassirer (an international figure in healing), Mario van Boeschoten (an internationally renowned organisational consultant), John Heron (an author and international facilitator) and other visiting trainers and facilitators have been invited to challenge each of us without exemption. At the receiving end of their loving attention, I know they took this invitation to heart. Eric's weeks were often the occasion for challenge of particularly difficult kinds, and in that respect I did my work alongside everyone else.

As we have begun to understand that we are a peer learning organisation, Oasis has undergone a number of developments, shifts and transformations. However, the organisation has always been moving towards expressing more and more clearly a sense of the possibilities for people both to live as themselves – *to express their personal and individual identity* – and to flourish in that individuality alongside others who are engaged upon a similar struggle. Whilst role differences, relationships and personal connections inevitably shape and influence how that takes place and what is possible, in the end it does not determine what people together are able to accomplish, if only they have the faith to face their reality together and share their personal struggle with others.



### An Educational Venture

The organisation is a place for people to learn – a place where they can test out their boundaries and limits within a *peer learning framework and within the dynamics of a group that holds the crucible for development*. This approach makes the work a developmental enterprise. It draws upon a wide range of influences and approaches including therapy, but it is not a therapy course, nor is it therapy training.

In this crucial respect, the peer learning organisation is only *like* real life with the difference that it is real life with the addition of being open to the effort of making the unconscious and implicit, conscious and explicit. I want to work, and I want a peer learning organisation like Oasis to work, in the real world, with the issues other people have to manage and work with. I understand the view that by separating things off and containing them very deliberately, it is possible to magnify the experiences that then take place to a useful degree. It has its uses and it has its supporters and in so many respects that is also how we work. The crucial boundary that holds things in check is *the peer learning group, or the wider peer learning organisation*.

We are attempting to develop a philosophy and an approach that does not stand apart from life, but works in and with life. This is a key issue in my work; not only in developing the organisation but also in helping others where role overlap is common. I do not see those people, groups and organisations that I work with as ‘helpless’ clients with ‘pathology’ to sort out. I regard them as functioning individuals, groups and organisations that need some assistance in:

- Working out where they are
- How they got there
- Where they might go next.

Oasis is an educational venture working on a peer learning basis both as colleagues developing the organisation and on the programmes we offer. *We contract our relationships carefully on the basis that individuals enter into relationship as adults*. This can be seen reflected in the stress we place upon the contracting stage of our developmental counselling model. I cannot begin the work unless I have a clear contract. The issues of role conflict and strain can, with mechanisms such as this, be worked with and we can all learn. A commitment to *openness, feedback and reflection* forms the basis of the work I do with others. This does not mean that everything that has needed to be faced in the past was faced or that it is now, but I do my best to work out conditions and guidelines from the experience that I gain.

I talk of *‘trusting the process’* and of Oasis being a *‘process organisation’*. The process lives beneath, within and transcends each of the phases; there can be much interference to the process yet the process can remain relatively whole. However, if I attempt to manipulate the process, difficulties and crises arise sooner or later. There is a truism that the angels offer help, first in the form of *wisdom* and, if the lesson is not heeded, then in more challenging and material form until it comes as woe. I understand this to be a way of saying that, *I can cheat the process only so much and only for so long, before I end up in a place that is too unpleasant to be worth being in*. I cannot shortcut the process. If I cut down on preparation, if I remove reflection and if I side-step reviewing I am left not with the process, only with *activity*. Activity is addictive and deceptive, but in the end it leads away from one’s true purpose.

It is by being in company with others and working in a peer and self-assessment framework those others can help me recognise if I am losing my sense of the process. The risk of becoming lost in activity is that I have insufficient connection with myself or the work to have a reliable sense of where anything or anyone is. I then have to make it up as I go along and am left with no way of knowing where things are going until something occurs that holds me still for long enough to find out.

## An Afterword: Growing Professionalisation in the Helping World

This chapter is an account of the dilemmas of moving from a peer form of education and learning into the real world of practice. It describes how practice activity is more concerned with issues of professionalisation and accreditation, and how it therefore becomes more and more distorted from the egalitarian impulse that is inherent in the peer principle. It is included here to highlight the dilemmas of peer education in the real world of practice and, as such, can usefully be read by everyone not just those who are helpers.

### The Demise of the Professional

We know that the whole arena of the professional is all but worn out and that most professions are suffering both crises of identity and agonies of conscience for what they put up with, allow or otherwise collude with. The speed at which information is now available, via the Internet, for example, means that the informed layperson may well know as much, or more, about certain aspects of the work of many professionals as most professionals do themselves. One has only to think for a moment of people who one knows who have found medical treatment via the Internet, remedied mistakes to their financial affairs, or found other 'professional' help, to realise that the power of having instantaneously available information to hand is an unstoppable force that will break up the monopoly of privilege and position that professions have traditionally enjoyed.

Having access to restricted information is one of the cornerstones of professional assurance, together with the implicit contract with society that, in return for certain privileges and rights, they will act on behalf of the rest of us who are unable, inferior or incapable of action on our own behalf. This is because we don't have the information or the access to the places (or networks) where the information is held and the decisions are made. Once information becomes accessible to anyone who wants it, most professions begin to lose their unchallengeable position.

Others will quickly come along, no less competent, with up-to-date information and knowledge: others who will charge less, offer a more efficient service and who will be able to give a credible account of their practice by whatever criteria the customer or client wishes. Increasingly, the measure of competence will lie in past, satisfied customers, recommendations and an established reputation. These all take time to acquire. These are also ways of offering a service that professionals have not had to bother with quite so much in the past.

The professional has a vested interest in discouraging individuals from acting on their own behalf, from finding out for themselves or for questioning the authority of the information that is provided. This is not necessarily something individual professionals deliberately set out to do: it is more a result of the way in which professions have traditionally been regarded. The temper of the times is to move away from experts who stand apart and tell us what is good for us. Hence the confusion of how to treat patients by many doctors, who want to involve their patients more in their own health care, but aren't sure how. Similarly, there are many older patients who don't want all this involvement in their health care; they have been well-trained by society at large to expect experts to know what is best for them and to quietly accept what they are given.

Across the range of transactions between professionals and the public at large, the consensus of what is expected of the one and demanded by the other is no longer predictable. A new generation of young people is growing up with a well-versed approach to their rights as consumers. They are not likely to fall for the mystique of the professional aura unless there is some substance to it. They are also more likely to initiate complaints if the service they receive is unsuccessful or if it fails to meet the claims made. At such a time, to create a profession based on something so flimsy as the success of a human meeting between two strangers is a more than risky endeavour.

### 'Humanistic' Practice

Much of the influence in the growth of new approaches entering the helping and therapy world derives from the world of Humanistic Psychology, or the 'third force' as it was known 30 years ago. Disenchanted with conventional 'treatment', the medical model and the notion that people had to be labelled as 'sick' before they could get better, the humanistic movement generated an alternative and radical paradigm that underpinned the immense numbers of methods that developed from it.

With little interest in the workings of the traditional professions and institutional approaches, humanistic psychology pioneered a way of working that was, in all essential respects, a peer model of self-help. It regarded much of what was termed 'therapeutic need' as capable of responding to educational opportunities, albeit of an altogether new kind. Therapy was not the aim, professionalising the activity not the task and building an empire absolutely not the desire.

Humanistic practitioners, at one time, were leading a radical challenge to the established way that mental health, social action and education were practised. They combined a strong analysis of the institutional and political frameworks that constrained the limitation of human potential along with developing a set of experiential methods and techniques. The aim of such techniques was nothing less than the liberation of the individual, a freeing of potential and the flourishing of the person in relation to others so that they could become co-creators in the project called 'living'.

The interpersonal dimension was crucial. Encounter<sup>21</sup> best expresses this purpose. It is the most broadly based and 'eclectic' of humanistic and human potential approaches. It is also the least ideological in that it is practised by any number of different leaders in very different ways; however an underlying common view was a respect for individual experience, a commitment to 'working it out' and of making dilemmas and difficulties more 'acted out' than talked about: change rather than insight was the goal. Here you had individuals working out their own issues in company with others and through others and as the process unfolded there was still space for the transpersonal<sup>22</sup> to find its way into the room! Nothing was excluded. Here we have 'me' and 'you' and 'us' and the numinous all in concert together.

The conventional world has taken an interest in these ways of working, but not in that radical impulse. It has captured, seduced, or otherwise hijacked the spirit of the enterprise. Now the typical practitioner arriving to the banquet either has thought little about all this, or is happy to go along with the deal because there are apparent rewards to be had – like a licence to practise and the hope that with it will come the guarantee of clients. I doubt this myself, and I believe that sooner or later the therapy world will implode. There will be too many therapists for too few clients and a growing groundswell of opinion from participants that they have been duped into signing up to become practitioners in a dwindling market. The resentment will be strong.

### The Risk of Insularity

The 'defensive'<sup>23</sup> practices that thus develop (for understandable reasons), the constraints that are placed upon such agencies and the limited amount of attention that is paid to the *relationship* between helper and helped, all have meant that much individual personal suffering is not, in fact, alleviated by the statutory agencies. Such defensive practice stifles innovation and change and reduces the interest in practice for many otherwise well-motivated practitioners. As a result, activities like counselling and other informal ways of offering help have grown up largely because the institutional framework within which statutory and formal professional organisations operate actually leaves a lot of human suffering unattended. To make another profession out of an activity that has largely grown in volume as a result of the failure of the professional response itself is a massive internal contradiction that the world of counselling is determinedly avoiding recognising.

The helping world is increasingly absorbed with its own concerns. It reproduces a model of the world that is more a reflection of its own composition and redolent of the dilemmas which are of interest to its own members, rather than bearing any great resemblance to the major social and personal issues that preoccupy the majority of citizens in modern society. This insularity fosters the view that the wider world is full of similar folk who will be beating a path to the door of the newly qualified practitioner. This, however, is not the case. Few practitioners make a successful living out of one-to-one practice; it is not a well-paid occupation, except for all but the smallest minority. Listening to a succession of individuals on an hourly basis is an odd way to spend one's time and does call into question the ability of the practitioner to spend their time in other, equally challenging ways, if this is all they do.

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<sup>21</sup> See any of Will Schutz's books, such as *Joy*, *Profound Simplicity* and especially *Elements of Encounter*.

<sup>22</sup> The transpersonal is an all-purpose term to suggest the divine, the numinous and the sacred – others may use other terminology.

<sup>23</sup> The term defensive practice is one used by Chris Argyris, amongst others, to point out how professions, as they come increasingly under pressure from litigation, or its threat, begin to spend more and more of their time in efforts to out-manoeuvre themselves from the potential of being held negligible. Practitioners, likewise, spend more and more of their time ensuring they have CYA (covered your ass) and are not likely to have complaining clients that bring about lengthy disciplinary procedures.

There are two arguments here. Firstly, that listening to individuals and their concerns is far too arduous for anyone to make an exclusive living from it. Secondly, it is far too removed from being engaged with the concerns of having to be in the world oneself. It is all very well helping others get patched up as a result of their struggle in the combat zone of the 'real world', but what credibility does the practitioner have, when they have all but exiled themselves from taking part in the same struggle any longer? In some ways, if the helping conversation and counselling is about enabling another to live out the life that is 'theirs' then it is, in some measure, dependent upon the practitioner having a notion of what it is to live out the life that is 'theirs' too. From the comfort of the armchair, it is easy to dispense compassion, liberal doses of insight and worthy direction.

Any new activity, especially if it has a fashionable following, runs the risk of falling in love with itself, of becoming too self-important, 'cliquey', or so concerned with its social kudos that respectability (which has usually been of precious little concern in the early days) becomes a major issue. In short, there is a risk of those involved becoming exclusive, prescriptive and aloof; reproducing the very same shortcomings of the predecessors they have replaced.

### **11,000 People Can't Be Wrong!**

The helping world has not escaped this problem. This is most apparent in the way its umbrella organisation has changed its profile and stance to its own concerns and in the status it has attached to itself to legislate on behalf of the legions of folk who have an interest in this all-purpose term, 'counselling'. Not long ago the membership of the BACP represented just about every position it was possible to imagine as tenable in relation to helping via counselling, then it began the creeping process of internal authoritarianism. This was before it had accredited counsellors and only had members, folk who supported what was then the BAC because they had an interest in counselling and wanted to share a connection with those of like mind.

From being an umbrella association, the BAC quickly went on to become authoritarian, high-handed and complacent in its assumption of its own right to prescribe and to police the world of counselling. This has not been without cost to the various bodies and groups represented within the umbrella organisation itself. Some have truncated their processes, shifted their ground and developed artful contradictions that attempt to square practice with belief. Some have acquired the ability to sit comfortably with groups of other practitioners, who operate from a view of the person that is fundamentally at odds with their own, out of fear that they might be left behind. All are in fear of the impending demand that those in the helping world become 'registered'.

When groups with such varied visions of the nature and place of the person, and the nature of the kind of society in which the person flourishes, can comfortably sit together to carve out who will get which share of the consumers' market, then we have arrived at the conventionalisation of a once radical call. The drift into respectability is all but complete. The search for social position is soon rationalised in the name of 'making the world a safer place for clients', whilst the members are fast elevating the activity into a 'profession'. The righteous sense of self-assurance that comes from knowing not only that you are right, but that you are unassailable, tempts all but the most scrupulous into edging beyond the frontiers of self-respect and into the land of proclamations and censure.

In 1995, Tim Bond, then Chair of the BAC, wrote a letter to *Self and Society* in relation to a long-running issue. In the correspondence surrounding the matter, the BAC had presented itself, at least to this reader, as righteous and above the need to give a direct account of itself (a criticism also made by others). The tone of the more recent letter went something like 'the BAC has its ways and that should be good enough for the rest of us'; a form of 'trust us, we know what we are doing'. It was not an appealing call, and all the more dubious when addressed to people who pride themselves on being self-directed, freely committed individuals who can be expected to sift out the arguments.

The BAC at the time had over 11,000 members and is, of course, the biggest organisation of its kind in the 'helping' world. It contains within its uneasy bosom a great many organisations like Relate, WPF, and other professional counselling organisations, including some that operate in industry. It also represents its members, the vast majority of whom are not accredited counsellors and have little affiliation to the organisations that have such a forceful influence upon the organisation as whole. The point was echoed once again, that given such a collection of respectable and worthy contributors, the BAC could not possibly be wrong, could it?

### Signs of the Times

Here we have the living example of the deformation and degeneration of even the worthiest of motives that accompanies certain kinds of success. The impulse that brings people together to share concerns and to promote a common commitment can so easily become subsumed under the creation of an orthodoxy to promote the interests of a 'profession'. Once you begin creating a profession, you have to claim an area of expertise. That gained, you then have to go on to protect it and to define it in such a way that only you can satisfactorily accomplish what is necessary within it. You have to have special routes to acquire the supposed expertise, a way of discouraging those who are seen to be 'fakes' and charlatans, i.e. anyone else who does anything remotely like what you do who you decide (with 'good' reason) that you don't like. You have to become vigilant in protecting your interests and especially the interests of those you purport to serve. The more 'expertise' is required to do anything, the more of this 'expertise' you acquire, the more it will cost; the more it costs, the more it will be valued and the more it becomes a commodity whose value can be redeemed. It is not long before you are then on the way to believing that you are in a profession.

This in turn sets you apart from those you serve, who now need protecting, not from the likes of you, but from the likes of those who look like you, but who are really only masquerading as being able to do what you do because they have not had the benefit of the training you have had. Once you have obtained an entrance ticket for such a feast, you have entered the realm of disputatious controversy. You need vigilant watchdogs and all the paraphernalia of bureaucratic policing. No one is safe, but everyone who was 'in' at the time of the 'carve-up' at least has a share of the carcass.

In a newly emerging profession, the stakes are high and the definition of who is competent to do what with who is a matter of livelihood for some people: hence the contentious correspondence in *Self and Society*. The BACP has now largely gained the monopoly on counselling, though it has not been able to fill the increasing vacuum created by the removal of much of our social welfare provision, but beware, it is upon us: 11,000 people can't be wrong! Well, in my view, there's very little that 11,000 educated people would agree upon about the nature of human relationships and how to conduct them. But 11,000 people will willingly participate in the fraudulent pretence that they do in order to gain the benefits of membership, or (more likely) avoid the fear of the consequences of *not* belonging and where that might place them – in professional exile.

### The 'Expert'

The more you possess, or claim to possess, expertise in a form that is not generally available or widespread in society, a midwife, or a financial expert, for example, the more you are required to ensure that such expertise is not misused in exploiting or taking advantage of those you serve – the client. It benefits all concerned in such cases that some form of service agreement is established to make clear what claims are being made on the part of the provider, what rights are offered to the consumer and what options are open in the case of a dispute. The medical profession is the most obvious example of such an arena where all these elements are present to a potentially acute degree.

It is hard to imagine a practice less in need of regulation of the medical kind than the so-called 'talking cure', except that counselling has no technological, specialist or essentially unique claim upon which to base a case for having a special position. The Emperor's new clothes are there for all to see and the counselling fraternity is fast stitching together a garment of hope and convincing itself that it is a raiment of light. Yet, only a second glance reveals that it is all little more than a collective collusive device to attain a respectability that its practitioners clearly feel they cannot acquire from doing a good job and adopting the work as an honourable occupation.

The derivation from the medical model seems to confuse the need to claim a certain status for those practising the art of therapy and to promote standards of practice and I am not sure that you can easily do the two things within one set-up. The two tasks are very different. The first is about gaining credibility for the position you intend to make your own – the political task of a pressure group. The second is about continuing education and development and enhancing the opportunities for those involved in the work. In reality, this often becomes little more than developing an apparatus of mystique. It is a way of maintaining the necessary role distance to claim the special status that you have attained.

In a social framework of goodwill and collaboration, most disputes would expect to be managed informally. However, as we know, we live in an ever-increasing litigious society, where the right to sue is more frequently sought and used. The world of therapy particularly, and counselling to a degree, has allowed itself to be caught up within this mood by wishing to ape the same kind of procedures and rules.

The controversy surrounding the issue of the false memory syndrome, for example, has been one of the most noticeable influences adding to the increasing concern of members of the therapy world about their rights and their protection. The impact of child abuse work at all levels has had a further influence. There are those who have been maligned as a result of such accusations; righteous over-concern to protect those suffering abuse has often led to a longer-term mess. There are those who have taken the question of abuse and extrapolated from it that all manner of 'incidents' constitute examples of abuse. They then go on to feel the right to claim the privilege of being a 'victim' from their selected examples and thereby the right (that they assume goes with it) of taking action against any oppressor they can uncover. Without travelling too far down such a road, it is not hard to see why there is such concern and even panic about all this amongst some folk in the therapy world.

### **Learning from Failure**

Of all the activities that are concerned with musing on the human condition, intervening in human affairs or in being effective in human relations, the world of counselling and psychotherapy is by far the most concerned with its own stance, its claim to respectability and its right to command an exclusive preserve that all others must bow down and worship. It is so finely tuned to the minutiae of interaction, it has a whole collection of interpretations that cover all possibilities and codify all the likely movements between people. It has a self-assured conviction that it possesses a unique mode of interpreting the realities it sets out to describe in comprehensive and unchallengeable terms. It is a self-referential system.

If you do not belong to the discourse, you cannot enter into it. Once you are in it, you are part of the reality. Suggesting that it may be possible to sit down with another human being and judge the effectiveness of what takes place in other than therapeutic terms is not something most psychotherapists these days seem to regard as possible or worthwhile. Human conduct, social interaction, is thus reduced to the psychological. This is a deep insult to other ways of 'reading' the world, ways that neither claim nor wish to assume such a dominant or totalising command of the phenomena: but therapy is a closed world and yet it is the world.

It is a closed world, in the sense that all those who are not equipped and licensed to enter it are excluded from its arcane mysteries. Simultaneously, it becomes the means of reinterpreting that other world; the world outside that most therapists have fled. Therapeutic versions of the one true way, the 'real' account of what is going on are fiercely contested. The energy, once spent in arguing between themselves, is now converted into promoting themselves as a united body of practitioners, which has resolved all major differences in order to share in the right to become associates of a professional organisation that covers a diversity of beliefs and style of practice that in any other occupation would be a joke. The former opposition to one another that has, for the time being, 'disappeared', is now projected upon the internal malcontents and upon those judged as 'incompetent' by the standard bearers of each coterie.

So we find that there is a dubious unity in the standards required to practise amongst very different schools with very different views about the person and how to relate to the person, but a fierce agreement that all forms of incompetence should be weeded out and publicly disgraced. All as a way of proving, both to one another and the public at large, that we are all very purist in our forms of worship and at the same time are without mercy to those who transgress our moral codes.

When there is little to show for the activity, then there is little upon which to base a commanding claim for recognition. At such a point you cannot say that psychotherapy is effective, because there are insufficient results to prove it. You cannot point to demonstrable changes that will take place; research into the field is very mixed and difficult to 'read'. If you are to hoodwink the public into believing that you have something that ought to be recognised as 'professional', then the way to demonstrate your worthiness lies almost exclusively in your moral stance. Making so much of the moral stance you adopt may give some reassurance for a time, but sooner or later there will be enquirers asking just what you are so morally superior about and the exact content and substance of your claim.

The way you display your moral position is through the stance you take to any form of mistake and failure that comes your way. In other words, to begin to create a climate of such moral righteousness about the need to be policed amongst those who would be members that it obscures the fact from everyone that there is not much to this activity – certainly not much that can be identifiable and agreed upon even amongst those who do it! Such an atmosphere makes learning from failure a risky business. There is a strong investment in hiding mistakes, even explaining them away as examples of something else, or of finding ways to justify the matter in other terms. It creates a temptation to use sophistry and prevarication and to reduce disclosure rather than encourage it. Kindliness, warmth and support for error, is all very well for the client. It is part of the professional task to allow the client to heal, but such compassion does not seem extend to the colleague in difficulty, or to the helper in a bind.

### **The ‘Recognition’ Impulse**

In 1987, when Oasis was designing its own Advanced Diploma, The Practice of Counselling and the Management of Change, as it was then entitled, these considerations were barely apparent. The need for courses to seek ‘recognition’ from the BAC, for example, was neither so strong nor so totalitarian. ‘Recognition’ of newly launched courses seemed to offer a radical means of shifting the way most educational institutions offered counsellor training. It was a way of moving the focus of the training out of the academic and theoretical and into the practical and experiential, paying attention to the group dimension. That hasn’t been the result.

In the case of programmes, its influence has been to stifle innovation and promote uniformity in all the major aspects of provision – diversity is largely restricted to the incidentals of ‘style’ – and uniformity in the ideological stance to the work. Courses, of whatever diverse persuasion, once ‘recognised’ quickly realised they had more to gain by being more and more like each other rather than by continuing the open debates and disputes about the merits of different forms of approach to this helping business, which had been such an attractive part of the culture in the past. The standardisation of the activity is all but complete. And all this has taken place at a time when standardisation is not the way of the future in counselling, or anything else. Standardised forms of practice are a remnant from a nineteenth-century, hierarchical mentality that desires to create a monopoly position by providing guarantees of dubious worth that are simply irrelevant to the twenty first century.

Recognition of courses was the first step in what became the ‘long march through the institutions’ of the dead hand of conventionalism, yet it set out as a radical initiative. The ‘Green Booklet’, published by the BAC itself, set out some superb proposals for counsellor training programmes (proposals that Oasis adopted and retained in its Advanced Diploma programmes), to make them more representative of the spirit of the enterprise itself (folk working things out together within the spirit of a peer relationship). It gave support to those who were working in academic institutions to seek some recognition for experiential methods of working and assessment, and group involvement in the design and structure of the programmes they were receiving. It fostered ‘modelling’ the process of the helping relationship itself, where helper and client worked out their own way forward together. This modest, but radical, impulse soon became prescriptive and more narrowly focused: less ambitious and more authoritarian simultaneously. The nature of the radical proposals were modified, and even dropped altogether, in order to appease academic institutions that were not about to change the nature of their courses at the behest of an outside body that had no power.

Like most petty minded, power-driven impulses when they meet a stronger rival, the Recognition initiative did not reconsider its own position, it simply shifted its parameters. If it couldn’t bring about much change to the way institutions delivered their training, it could certainly play about with the niceties at the edges. Rather than reconsider the fundamental nature of its efforts as a means of influencing events, it had fallen under the spell of its own charisma for power and control. The prescriptions became ever more deadly but over less and less crucial areas of activity. The Recognition process later gave way to a formal course accreditation process and the colonisation of a major part of the helping world was almost complete.

### **Counsellor Accreditation**

The drive to accredit counsellors had begun at much the same time. It too came to fruition with the decision to have a UKCR form of registration to ape and imitate that similar initialised body, the UKCC for nursing. The UKCC is a statutory body, the UKCR, however, is no such thing at all. Such is the way of authoritarian impulses!

The BAC had proclaimed itself *the* authority about how training should be done if people wanted its imprimatur. The BAC is, of course, a membership organisation, not an educational body. It had by now, however, turned itself into an authority – *the* authority over the world of counselling – with a consequent strangulation of innovation and initiative in favour of the bland and normative approach to helping that it proposes we should adopt to life itself. What limits there are to its competence we have yet to see, but fierce in its sanctions and arbitrary in the way it conducts itself it is – all with a well meaning counsellor's anodyne explanation of being professional or in the spirit of 'safe practice'.

The BAC is already finding that developments like the CPCAB<sup>24</sup> and the arrival of NVQs for counselling will have some influence upon breaking up its attempt at monopoly. In the long-term, the helping world may well fracture and regroup as a result of the failure of the sectional interests to maintain the present agreements or to hold the positions they have taken.

For example, it makes little sense for an organisation with 11,000 members to have less than one third of the membership accredited as practitioners. It raises the question, 'Who is the organisation for?' It also becomes very easy to develop a scapegoat response to those who are caught contravening the codes, on the grounds of, 'get the buggers who slipped and no-one will look too closely at how I get it wrong from time-to-time.' Devising junior leagues of BAC helpers (for those who don't meet the full requirements for entry onto the register of accredited counsellors) won't appeal either to those who value and respect the work they do and think it is every bit as valuable, if different, from the work of their more 'senior' accredited colleagues. 11,000 people are no guarantee to any claim you might make, other than you now have a body of like-minded conformists who will resist no claims made on their behalf by those who are supposed to represent them. The BAC code is, in my opinion, both so tight and so absurdly contentious that many paid up members must have many doubts about a lot of it.

The last thing someone wants to discover, following the expense of their training, is that they have adopted (often by the uncritical acceptance of the norms implicit in the training they received) an ideological justification for the 'position' they take to the practice that is 100 years out of date. Traditional professions maintained their social position and their kudos via restricted entry and long-term academic training; not all of it strictly necessary to become competent, but a sure means of ensuring the lower orders couldn't afford it. Here comes a new activity working out a way to be in the world, and where does it find its inspiration and its model coming from? The most out-of-date, anxiety-ridden and fear-based of professional forms of practice – the medical world – is a profession that is itself in the throes of revolutionising its own understanding of accountability after a series of very public disgraces.

### The Deformation of Practice

Just when every other profession is seeing the wall fall down and the barriers to entry removed, the helping world is fast erecting them – and how high! In the long-term I don't think this will work and I think the long-term will soon be with us. This broad context, the developments that are taking place within the world of counselling and therapy, the matter of complaints and how they are handled, the things that get written about in the publications<sup>25</sup> of the helping world, all point to a self-inflicted crisis of conscience; the outpourings of a guilty conscience for an impulse betrayed. Regular features of anguished concern are printed in the journals written by well-known practitioners asking themselves if the professionalisation of helping has 'institutionalised' the impulse – as though the one does not come with the other.

Human relations practitioners need not get strongly drawn into this war, though they do need to work out their 'position' in relation to it. The Oasis approach is not even about counsellor training *per se*, though everyone who completes the Oasis Advanced Diploma should be able 'to offer themselves to another for the purposes of change,'<sup>26</sup> know when to stop, when to say, 'No,' and when to refer. These kinds of accomplishments are part of the process of developing effective *human relations practitioners* – individuals who know something about themselves, the other and the social context of our times. They will also have the know-how to put all these strands together to create for themselves and those around them a more fulfilled way of operating. They do not always find the process pleasant or easy, but they do recognise it is about taking up the life that is theirs rather than becoming mediocre at a profession not enough people can afford or necessarily need.

<sup>24</sup> CPCAB: Counselling and Psychotherapy Central Awarding Body; a qualification organisation (there are others) that awards certification to programmes that range from skills based introductory programmes through to long-term advanced forms of training that lies outside the control of the BACP and is approved by the DFE.

<sup>25</sup> *Self and Society*, journal of the Association of Humanistic Psychology with a circulation of approximately 1,000, and *Counselling*, the journal of the BAC, which regularly features writers wringing their hands over what has become of the art of the helping relationship but with no intention of calling a halt to the process.

<sup>26</sup> A favourite and all-purpose description of the counselling relationship that has a long, honourable, though unidentifiable, history.



It seems that it is the field of psychotherapy that has been the first to gain the momentum to license and accredit itself at an altogether unseemly pace, and that it is the humanistic practitioner who has been most faced with the need to compromise. In an effort to find and then retain a professional connection with other styles of practice and other approaches, humanistic psychotherapy has been willing to swallow its own radicalism. It has been in favour of adopting the rigour and discipline of professional policing that is intrinsically at odds with the way humanistic practice works best.

John Heron noted a long time ago that you cannot license the activity of human relationships. There are too many ways of doing it and too many people involved. What you can do is license a function and a title. It may well be that 'counsellor' becomes a licensed title, only able to be claimed by certain individuals who have completed a particular form of training and who conform to a particular set of conditions. However, I think even such a state of affairs is a lot further away than many people think. It is easy to propose such a view, but it would be a nightmare to establish and to police. That's why, to date, governments have allowed the industry to regulate itself. That and the other good reason that relationships would be difficult to proscribe when there is no clear dividing line between the human ability to relate and the claims of a specialist expertise.

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