

Chapter 5: Four Roles of the Gestalt Intervener: Holistic Presence Using Experiential Learning Theory

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"Personal feelings and experience are the only realm in which humans are unimpeachable sources of truth." (Buckingham & Goodall, 2019, p.5)

Constant change and complexity are part of the fabric of our lives. Some of us thrive under these circumstances. However, most find it unnerving, disheartening, and at times outright scary. I think of the 21st century as the "age of not knowing" when everyday experiences are so new and unfamiliar that we cannot easily discern what to do or how to do it. Many people expect and respond fairly effectively to small bursts of change. Now they are bombarded by unrelenting disruption and volatility.

Change practitioners – leaders, managers, administrations, consultants, coaches and facilitators – feel the weight of supporting those caught in the throes of this new normal and are seeking additional resources to assist them. If practitioners are to be helpful, they must provide more pragmatic intervention strategies – ones that spark connection, collaboration, and sense of community that effect achievement of desired goals.

One assumption that underpins my work is that unprecedented change requires commitment to continuous learning. Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 2015) gives the Gestalt practitioner an additional template for intervening in complex dynamics while keeping continuous learning as the ultimate goal. The framework is the *Four Roles of the Gestalt Intervener* or *FROGI*. It is a coherent and actionable adaptation of Kolb's four modes of learning – concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation – and yields four corresponding ways to intervene:

- *Experiencing*, by attending to the practitioner's personal and immediate concrete experience;
- *Noticing*, by observing patterns and themes emerging from the client and immediate environment;

- *Grand theorizing*, by making-meaning of what is noticed *from the client and immediate environment* using abstract concept and generalizations;
- *Influencing the client's process* and advancing the work through active experimentation.

Experiential Learning Theory is well-suited for the process orientation of Gestalt practice. When the FROGI model is coupled with prevailing Gestalt theory and methods, the practitioner is better prepared to leverage the benefits of change rather than surrender to its burdens. The objective is to forge a more holistic presence – capacity and capability to attend to and respond “on demand” to complex dynamics in a range of ways and at multiple levels of system – individual, two-person, group and larger systems. Holistic presence involves the practitioner’s ability to enact all four roles.

To establish context for FROGI, I offer brief backstories of Gestalt practice and learning theory that highlight the congruence between the two perspectives. This is followed by a description of the FROGI model and its application to a case scenario. I end with strategies for developing holistic presence.

What is Gestalt?

I have been writing about Gestalt for many years and when I think back, it seems everything about Gestalt if not outright radical, is unorthodox. Of course, context is important to understanding Gestalt’s nonconformist ways. Gestalt began at the turn of the 19th century when revolutionary ideas took shape in all realms of society. One significant idea stemmed from a *theory of learning* put forth by German philosopher Graf Christian von Ehrenfels in the early 1900s. Von Ehrenfels coined the term “Gestalt,” a German word loosely translated as form, configuration or whole. He believed his students learned best when they organized and considered concepts in their entirety rather than broken into individual parts. His learning theory caught the attention of three researchers at Berlin University – Kurt Wertheimer, Wolfgang Kohler and Kurt Koffka – who wanted to explore whether the brain has similar self-organizing tendencies that influence human perception. The question was if the brain sees only part of an object, does it naturally seek to see the complete object. Their research findings convinced them that the answer was yes. What followed for the three researchers was the founding of an unconventional perspective known as Gestalt psychology. Kurt Lewin, Fritz Perls

and Laura Perls were members of the network of what I label the “radical Gestalt” at Berlin University at the time.

A few thoughts emerge about my sense of the “radical Gestalt.”

Gestalt...

- defied isolationist theory and asserted holism;
- dared to challenge Freudian psychology and assumptions of Newtonian physics;
- applied mindfulness in the concept of “awareness” to the therapeutic process;
- created a relational and dialogic practice built on *use-of-self*, *presence* and *high contact*;
- focused on *now* when the world wanted to hold tight to *then* and *next*;
- prioritized *how* and *what* over *why*;
- considered the body a valid source of information in therapeutic practice;
- encouraged client responsibility and accountability;
- proclaimed “*resistance is good*” and “*change is paradoxical*”;
- formulated a systems theory of human behavior;
- positioned the group as a foundational and potent structure for social change;
- recognized the validity of learning from subjective experience.

The point I seek to underscore is from the initial backdrop of learning theory two paths central to Gestalt practice were shaped: one by Lewin who almost single handedly created the field of social psychology and in like manner influenced the founding of the field of organization development (OD); the other by Fritz Perls, Laura Perls, Isadore From and Paul Goodman who founded Gestalt therapy. Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984) shares ancestral roots with Gestalt with an uncharacteristic perspective of holism and democracy in learning that aims to nullify the assumption of one best way to learn.

Intervening from a Gestalt Perspective: “Managing the Splash”

The word Gestalt is a noun and a verb, suggesting both an end state and a process; thus, the Gestalt practitioner is constantly ‘gestalting’ in search of a fuller ‘gestalt.’

Gestalt is a unique paradigm. Practitioners often hear from clients that they cannot describe what they do, adding they only know they experience something different. We explain that in the midst of complexity, our job is to “manage the splash.” I often muse that the Gestalt practitioner is like a duck “paddling beneath the water.” To the client, we appear to move smoothly across the turbulent streams of change that are full of stops and starts, sharp turns, and steep waves; but we are very busy and more often than not, uncertain about impact. The perceived composure is achieved by staying grounded and using foundational principles and methods of Gestalt that help keep the “splash” under control (see Rainey Tolbert, 2004 for details of Gestalt Organisation & Systems Development).

- A. Pursue Holism.** Rooted in self-organizing and social constructionist tendencies in human perception, the goal of Gestalt is to seek as full a picture as possible of the client situation. Lewin’s field theory (Wulf, 1996, p. 3) is a behavioral parallel of general systems theory where he describes the interdependence between the organism (person, client) and the environment (environment or total field). Even when there is a client of one, the interest is as much about all that surrounds that one client and the nature of the interaction of the client with different parts of their context.
- B. Focus on Process.** Unlike typical intervention approaches where emphasis is on content and *what* work gets done, Gestalt tilts toward process and *how* work gets done. The task always at hand is noticing patterns and emerging themes: what is present and what is not present; connections and disconnections; what works well and what is challenging; who is with whom and who is not with anyone.
- C. Work from Awareness.** Chidiac (2018) portrays Gestalt practitioners as “awareness agents” rather than “change agents” while Siminovitch urges development of “awareness IQ” (2017). Their sentiments are aligned with the emphasis Gestalt places on consciously knowing in the moment – one way to describe awareness. It is a form of mindful attentiveness that supports the practitioner taking residence in what philosopher Salomon Friedlander describes as the “zone of indifference” or zero point where complexity, chaos and conflict can best be held (Wulf, 1996, p.3). This also allows relaxation of ego and need “to get it right.”
- D. Bound Awareness.** Shape, organize, and configure awareness through the process of bounding to determine how and where

to intervene. Boundaries – open or closed, broad or narrow, deep or shallow – influence the strength of connection or “contact” with self and others. A leader is aware that operations are too complex and change is needed. She bounds her awareness when she decides where best to launch the change – with the senior leadership team, the entire company, or the division that most or least exemplifies the desired vision.

E. Transform Use-of-Self into Compelling Presence with High Contact. Gestalt reframes use-of-self in the concept of

“presence.” Nevis (1987) states that not only does the practitioner “stand for and express certain values, attitudes, and skills, but to use these in a way to stimulate, and perhaps evoke from the client, action necessary for movement on its problems” (p.54). As such, presence becomes relational use-of-self through evocation or provocation. Engagement and high contact are essential. The practitioner is alert and internally and externally aware, energetically available and fluidly responsive to the client (Chidiac, 2018).

F. Use the Cycle of Experience (CoE). First outlined by Perls (1947), the CoE is a model for tracking real-time, here-and-now phenomena through a seven-phase cycle that can be applied to a range of experience – personal, coaching, conflict, group, or large-scale change.

1. *Sensation.* Using the senses to gather data about self, others and the environment.
2. *Awareness.* Noticing emergence of patterns and themes from the sensory data.
3. *Energy.* Tracking energy and interest or lack thereof in the patterns and themes.
4. *Action.* Transforming energy, interest, and excitement into action.
5. *Contact.* Attending to the shifts and changes that occur as a result of action.
6. *Closure.* Assessing achievements, highlighting learning, and celebrating success.
7. *Withdrawal.* Supporting the need for rest, being, and renewal.

G. Follow the Unit of Work (UoW). While the CoE tracks here-and-now process, UoW is used to map, design, and organize planned change in three simple phases that overlay the CoE:

1. *Beginning* (sensation, awareness). Determine the work.

2. *Middle* (mobilization of energy, action, contact.) Do the work.

3. *End* (closure, withdrawal). Close the work.

With a UoW, large interventions (macro goals) can proceed in smaller, manageable steps (micro tasks).

H. Attend to Resistance. It is rare that a client moves uninhibited through the CoE and UoW.

Often, the reason for working with a behavioral professional is to get “unstuck.” The Gestalt practitioner comes prepared to work with “stuck systems,” whether in the form of the pull and push of resistance, ambivalence, conflict, polarities, multiple realities or understanding the difference between a *problem to be solved* and a *dilemma to be managed*.

I. Design Gestalt Experiments. These are “on demand” learning experiences used to stimulate client awareness. Experiments are co-created by client and practitioner and enacted in the moment. The power of the Gestalt experiment lies in what is known as creating a “safe emergency.” For instance, in the presence of the practitioner, two parties in conflict agree to “try new behavior” that involves some level of risk, yet is safe enough because of the trust they have in the practitioner.

Experiential Learning Theory

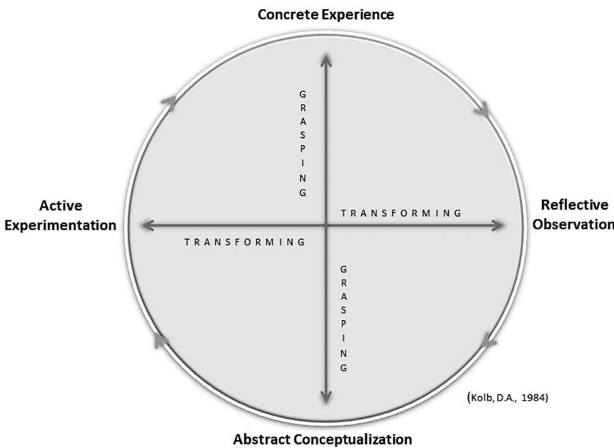
“What is essential is not that the therapist learn something about the patient and then teach it to him, but that the therapist teach the patient how to learn about himself (Perls, Hefferline and Goodman (1951, pp. 15-16).”

My introduction to experiential learning came during my graduate studies when I participated in my first T (training) – group. However, knowledge of the theoretical underpinnings of experiential learning did not arrive until my post graduate days at Case Western Reserve University “Case” in Cleveland, Ohio. During my first year, I was a teaching assistant to David Kolb in a course designed around experiential learning. It was also about this time that I became immersed in Gestalt theory and practice at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland. Soon, the congruence between experiential learning and Gestalt became apparent. Holism and learning from experience were common and made for a natural fit for me personally.

In ELT, learning is portrayed as an idealized learning cycle or spiral where

immediate *concrete experience* of sensations and feelings is the basis for *reflective observation* of themes and patterns that are assimilated through *abstract conceptualization* that are guides for *active experimentation*, application and practice. In ELT, there is no preferred way to learn, no learning hierarchy. Learning thus becomes a more holistic, integrative, and democratic process where the learner “touches all four learning bases,” alternating between grasping experience and transforming experience. (Figure A shows the experiential learning cycle).

Figure A: The Experiential Learning Cycle



The FROGI Model

Claire Stratford introduced me to the original version of FROGI in the Gestalt International Organization & Systems Development Program (IOSD). She said she had received the idea from a student at Case. Claire would sketch the FROGI design on a sheet of paper. She did not make a fuss of too much. Soon, we began teaching the theory behind the model, refining it along the way. This is the first article that is devoted to the theory and practice of FROGI.

The Four Roles of the Gestalt Intervener framework is a simple and straight forward guide for practitioners working with complex dynamics. It translates the four modes of learning in ELT into four corresponding ways to intervene, providing more intervention options; thereby expanding the practitioner’s range of presence.

- In *experiencing*, using Concrete Experience (CE), the focus is *the practitioner's* personal and immediate concrete experience. This involves an internal scan of sensory functions – see, hear, touch, smell and taste and the clearest guide for use-of-self. The engagement style is *role model*.
- In *noticing*, using Reflective Observation (RO), the practitioner observes patterns and themes emerging *from client behavior and immediate environment*. The focus is the client's process and dynamics. The engagement style is *process facilitator*.
- In *grand theorizing*, using Abstract Conceptualization (AC), the practitioner uses abstract theories, concepts, generalizations and metaphors to make-meaning of what is noticed *from the client and immediate environment*. The engagement style is *interpreter*.
- In *influencing*, using Active Experimentation (AE), the practitioner aims to create shifts that move the client around the CoE to complete units of work. The intervention could be a Gestalt experiment or other ways of impacting the work. Influencing involves intention, will, and a desire to help, guide and support. The engagement style is *coach and advisor*.

Case Scenario

The Executive Committee (ExCom) of a major multi-national firm meets to prepare a 30-minute presentation for the Board of Trustees. The focus of the presentation are the findings of the recent stakeholder satisfaction survey. The stakes are high because year-over-year performance numbers continue a downward trend in most areas of the company.

After contracting with the group about her role and the group's specific goals, the Gestalt practitioner positions herself at the table with the group so that she can effectively observe behavior and process; yet, not be a distraction. Grounding herself in awareness, she stays mindful of her internal experience while tracking behavioral dynamics (using the Cycle of Experience), task dynamics (using Unit of Work) as well as attending to the broader environmental context of the meeting (room, temperature, lighting, etc.). She then is prepared to use the FROGI model.

These are her observations after 20 minutes:

- Only half the group has participated in the discussion.

- The conflict between the Vice President (VP) of sales and the VP of manufacturing is being played out as the practitioner recalls it does each time the group meets.
- Her energy has begun to wane.
- Members of the group keep going in and out of the meeting to take calls.
- She has some idea of what might be happening in the group.
- She has thoughts about how to support the group’s process.
- The group never seems to be able to make a decision that everyone supports.
- She notices a difference in the conversation when the more silent individuals participate.

Table 1 describes the practitioner’s intervention choices.

Table 1: Case Scenario: Choosing a FROGI Intervention		
Learning Mode	Intervener Role	Interventions
Concrete Experience	Experiencing	Practitioner discloses here-and-now personal experience. <u>Example</u> . “I am aware of how low my energy is as I listen to your conversation.”
Reflective Observation	Noticing	Practitioner shares observations of patterns of behavior and themes emerging in the group. <u>Example</u> : “I notice that most of the time, everyone is not included in your conversation.”
Abstract Conceptualization	Grand Theorizing	Offers a grand theory to help the group make meaning of their experience. <u>Example</u> : “When you include everyone, your decision-making process improves.”
Active Experimentation	Influencing	Using the CoE and UoW, intervenes to advance the work. <u>Examples</u> : <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Make a suggestion: “Be more inclusive in your decision-making.”• Encourage dialogue and connection: “Talk among yourselves about your decision-making process.”• Design a Gestalt Experiment: “Would you like to experience what it is like when everyone participates in decision-making?”• To the two VPs in conflict, “talk to each other about when you have been really effective in presenting to the Board of Trustees.”

1. She determines the FROGI intervention that might be most helpful based on her “read” of the situation: experiencing, noticing, grand theorizing, or influencing.
2. She selects a level of system of the intervention: individual, two-person, sub-group, or total system.
3. She remembers the Gestalt intervention principle: *Clear. Concise. Get in. Get out.*

4. She makes her intervention, stays in awareness as she notices the impact, and begins the process all over again.
5. The goal is not to assess whether an intervention is right or wrong; rather, it is to assess if the intervention was carried out with clarity of intent. That is, did the practitioner do what she planned to do?

Feedback on FROGI

Generally, the FROGI gets good reviews when introduced to clients or in Gestalt education and training programs. Descriptions include “simple,” “pragmatic,” “accessible” and “fun.” One corporate CEO described the framework as “delicious.” However, there are points of feedback in each role worth mentioning.

- Experiencing can prove difficult for practitioners who customarily are detached and disconnected from themselves and others. The role directs awareness to the inner self, others and the immediate environment and requires the practitioner to selectively disclose that awareness as an intervention. This is not an easy role to acquire for abstract learners.
- In Noticing, the art of pattern recognition is critical for it is where experience is organized into themes and “Gestalts.” Practitioners must manage the tendency to interpret or judge rather than stay with data. Action-prone practitioners must acquire a taste for slowing down.
- Grand Theorizing is the most popular role. Initially, Gestalt faculty assumed the reason is it involves analytical skills. What was learned is that practitioners appreciate that after years of “bashing,” abstract learning is again valued and has a place in process consultation. Clients say Grand Theorizing helps them “understand the madness” in their world.
- Some practitioners are confused by Influencing, believing that they should not “tell” the client what to do. Though initially challenged, practitioners are open to learning how to positively influence process, design Gestalt experiments, and make good contact.

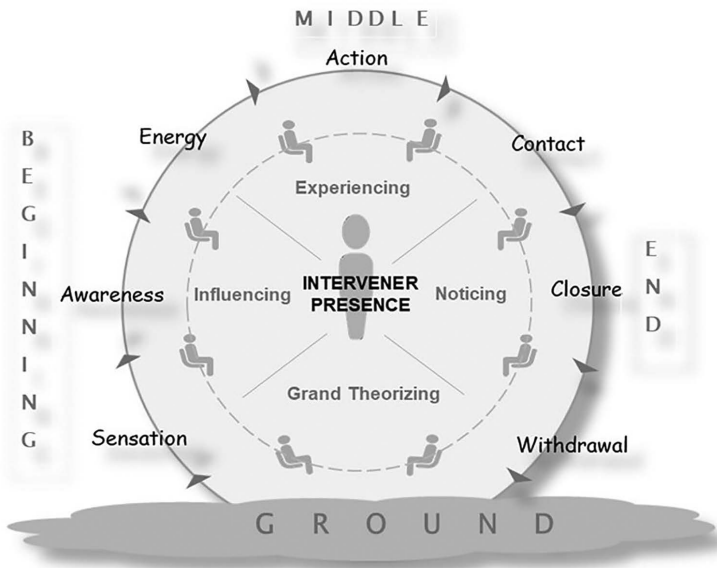
Dual Learning Cycles in Relationship

We are often asked why the process begins with the intervener in the first role, then shifts to the client and environment in the other three roles. The individual learner is the focus of ELT. This is in contrast with the FROGI model which is a relational frame that attends to the interaction between intervener and client. Both client and intervener are moving around respective learning cycles except the intervener's cycle of learning is more background while the client's cycle of learning is foreground. The FROGI model very explicitly and intentionally begins with the practitioner's self as instrument but immediately shifts to the client. It is useful to remember only the individual can report their personal experience. Others can only notice and perceive another person's behavior.

Holistic Presence

Holistic presence is the combination of intervening from a Gestalt perspective using basic principles and methods of Gestalt, e.g., Cycle of Experience, Unit of Work and the Four Roles of the Intervener (Figure B). Practitioners should become knowledgeable of experiential learning theory. This involves learning how to learn, becoming familiar with the experiential learning cycle, their personal learning preferences, and learning flexibility. All are useful in guarding against bias and overuse of a particular role (Kolb & Kolb, 2005a). This can be achieved by administering the Kolb Learning Style Inventory (Kolb & Kolb, 2011).

Figure B:
Elements of Holistic Presence: CoE, UoW, and FROGI



Cultivating Holistic Presence

Immediate steps for cultivating holistic presence are outlined below and includes suggestions from Yeganeh and Kolb (2009) on mindful practice in each role.

Developing capacity for Experiencing (CE). Clearing the mind is central to engaging in present moment experience. Deep breathing anchors the mind in immediate, here-and-now sensorial awareness of sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. Suggested practices include meditation and mindfulness that also reduce stress, increase clarity and calmness, and improve health. Interpersonal skills such as leadership, relationship and giving and receiving feedback can improve by developing the experiencing role.

Developing capacity for Noticing (RO). Observing behavioral dynamics and processes without judgement or interpretation is essential. Noticing can be enhanced by deliberately viewing things from different perspectives and with empathy. Stillness and quieting the mind fosters the ability to notice. This allows patterns and themes

“Gestalts” to surface. Noticing expands ability to appreciate multiple realities and engenders a natural tendency for diversity and inclusion. Information skills of pattern and theme recognition, data management and analysis can aid in noticing.

Developing capacity for Grand Theorizing (AC). Questioning assumptions can help focus the mind to make “theories-in-use” intentional rather than automatic. Taking time to view the relationship among themes and behavioral patterns can enrich grand theories. Creating contextual and relational knowledge rather than pursuing dichotomous thinking strengthens the capacity for grand theorizing. Analytical skills of theory building, data analysis and technology management can aid in the development and expression of grand theories.

Developing capacity for Influencing (AE). In influencing, the practitioner moves into the practical world of real consequences for the client. Influencing can be enhanced by working on the ability to intervene gracefully, without distracting from the client’s work. Practitioners can become competent in conducting Gestalt experiments by starting with less complicated experiments, such as Exaggeration (of behavior), Fantasy (imagining), and Language (e.g., use of “I” instead of “they”) that allow practitioners to try, test, and evaluate generative actions that are not too complicated. Practitioners must resist the automatic self-judgments, self-schemas, feelings and thoughts that support tendencies not to influence. Often there is an assumption that influencing is bad. This can be overcome by accepting influencing as a critical part of Gestalt work. Action skills, initiative, goal setting, and action taking, help in developing performance mastery.

Summary

As the world searches for novel ideas and innovative technologies to cope with change and complexity, the need for adaptive processes at the basic human level must not be forgotten. Learning is essential. With the FROGI model, Gestalt finds a partner in learning that elevates Gestalt practice to a fresh platform of contemporary knowledge and practice. Based on Kolb’s experiential learning theory, FROGI enhances the practitioner’s ability to develop holistic presence in four ways: (1) be fully in the moment through experiencing (2) attend to the client’s experience and broader environment through noticing, (3) make meaning of and clarify that experience by grand theorizing, and (4) through influencing,

support the client actively, creatively, and expediently testing and trying innovative ways of not only responding to but anticipating environmental demands.

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