

## **(1) Personal Abilities Framework (PAF)**

### **Introduction to Personal Abilities Framework**

It is a long held view at **Gestalt Therapy Australia** that any holistic assessment or evaluation process must include an examination of a student's personal abilities. The challenges are two fold; to identify the desired personal abilities and then to establish how to evaluate them. Despite the challenges, to omit the personal dimension from a matrix that includes practical skills and theoretical knowledge diminishes the holistic philosophy of Gestalt therapy and undervalues the emphasis placed in training on the development of the person as therapist.

We are always embedded in a context, impacted by our personal history, influenced by our relationships and making sense of our experience based on our unique perspective, from these joined influences our subjectivity emerges. All our self-assessments and evaluations of others are subjective and partial and through self-reflection, openness and dialogue we increase the chance of supporting others and ourselves. To manage this, and increase the utility of feedback, this evaluation process requires students to reflect on their own abilities before receiving verbal and written feedback from their teaching faculty. These reflections become the basis of an ongoing dialogue.

The **Personal Abilities Framework (PAF)** is a development of the Personal Abilities Rating Scale previously written by **Gestalt Therapy Australia** under the leadership of the founding directors Gabe Phillips and Claire Taubert. The initial inspiration was drawn from Malcolm Parlett's conceptualization of "*The Five Abilities Model*" and "*The Esalen Curriculum for the Human Potential*".

According to Parlett (2006), the five overarching creative abilities necessary to living well are: Responding, Interrelating, Self-recognizing, Embodying and Experimenting. The Esalen Curriculum for the Human Potential differentiates five interrelated domains of experience, mind (the cognitive realm), body (the somatic system), heart (the life of the emotions), spirit (the transpersonal dimension) and social (the domain of relationship, community and political engagement).

Taken together these related areas of human experience provide the ground from which **Gestalt Therapy Australia** has generated seven key personal abilities. The **PAF** identifies the personal abilities that we believe are integral to a student's ongoing development and are also important for healthy human development.

The abilities need to be read together in order to create a holistic picture of a developing Gestalt therapist.

**Acknowledgments:** Gabe Phillips and Claire Taubert

**Reference:** Wheeler, G. (2006). Parlett's Creative Abilities Model and the Esalen Curriculum for the Human Potential: A Comparative Study. *British Gestalt Journal*, 17(2), 46-58.

## **(2) Personal Abilities Framework (PAF)**

### **Orienting Statement for Personal Abilities Framework**

Students at **Gestalt Therapy Australia** participate in an inquiry based learning process that is holistic and developmental. Effective learning involves responding to the experiences offered in the training program with leadership, agency, openness and commitment. A central feature of being a student at **Gestalt Therapy Australia** involves participating in an experiential learning group, the wider Gestalt community, and being responsive to unfolding events - especially as they manifest in the learning process of the training group. This interrelating involves making and sustaining relationships with fellow students and faculty through sharing personal experiences, receiving feedback and repairing ruptures in relationships should they occur.

Engaging ever more fully in this relational activity requires developing deeper personal awareness and insight through self-reflection, inquiry and dialogue with others. In the experiential learning process students are encouraged to be curious and to investigate how they affect, and are affected by others (and the environment) through the way they relate and the choices they make. They are challenged to take opportunities to move beyond established patterns and into new territory and experiences of themselves and others.

The experiential context is central to the formation of gestalt therapists and goes to the very heart of what constitutes a gestalt approach. The gestalt therapist is not a so much a technician skilled in the application of various therapeutic interventions, but rather the very instrument of the therapeutic process. This requires the therapist to cultivate a deeply embodied self-awareness, creating the capacity for presence, attuned responsiveness, phenomenologically grounded awareness and the willingness for dialogical engagement. These abilities are best learnt through the lived experience of participation in a training group. While such a focus on group process may seem anachronistic, it remains the primary and most effective way of supporting prospective therapists to develop these capacities.

While the training cannot be structured into a neat and linear progression, each of the training years focuses on developing a specific set of competencies that aim to develop the emerging gestalt therapists.

In first year, students are invited and encouraged to explore and deepen their self-awareness. The focus is on building their capacity for a nuanced appreciation of their embodied experience, the sensations, feelings and thoughts that make up their moment-to-moment experience, as well as an understanding of their capacity for emotional arousal and affect regulation. This self-awareness is the ground on which the ongoing development of the therapist is built.

In second year, the development of this awareness process moves from a focus on

self-process to focusing others, and in particular understanding how self-experience is shaped by this engagement and interaction.

In third year the focus returns to the experience of the individual, but with a specific focus on better understanding how developmental contexts shape and influence individual experience. This 'field' focus also seeks to take into account the complex social and cultural situations in which we are all embedded.

Fourth year aims to integrate the learning of the three previous years, supporting students to weave together self-awareness, awareness of other and a sensitivity to how our situatedness shapes our experience can be applied in therapeutic practice. In this students engage with what they know of their own relational patterns and explore their developmental edges as emerging therapists.

In summary, the learning trajectory (though never linear) can be represented in the following way:

Self – How am I in the world. What do I sense, feel and think?

Self & Other – Who am I with you and who are you with me?

Self in Context – How do the contexts from which I have emerged shape who I am

Self & Other in Context – Who am I as an emerging gestalt therapist?

The **Personal Abilities Framework (PAF)** has been developed by the **Gestalt Therapy Australia** faculty to offer students a framework for self-reflection across seven key capacities that are crucial to the ethical and effective practice of gestalt therapy. The **PAF** will also support conversations between faculty and students at every stage of the students learning process at **Gestalt Therapy Australia** including: selection, progression, conduct and graduation. The **PAF** articulates a developmental progression that maps the desired learning trajectory across the four years of the training program.

The **PAF** will be to be used by both faculty and students. The faculty will use the **PAF** as a tool to guide their reflection on individual students progress and as an aid to mapping the function of the training group. The **PAF** will support important conversations about student development (mapping change across time), student progression, suitability to practice and current readiness to participate in a gestalt training program. Students will use the **PAF** as self-reflection tool, and to support dialogue both within the student body and between students and faculty. .

Each of the seven abilities of the **PAF** has linked inquiry questions for each year level. In this way it is possible to track the desired development progression across the training program.

The seven Personal Abilities are: **Self-Recognizing, Embodying, Responding, Interrelating, Experimenting, Contextualizing and Presence.**

## SELF-RECOGNIZING

**The Ability To Be Self-Aware:** to be able to get in touch with your personal here-and-now experience including your sensations, emotions, cognitions and actions. This includes the ability to recognize and name your subjective experience in meaningful and congruent ways, and to track and describe your immediate experience (as per the phenomenological method).

### **Year 1:**

*What supports and or constrains you to be aware? Considering the domains of here and now experience (sensations, emotions, cognition & actions), what do you recognize as being easily accessible and what needs development? What supports your capacity to respond to your here-and-now experience in meaningful ways? (For example, I am able to feel more fully present when I have sufficient external supports).*

**Year 2:** *What feedback did you receive last year that feels relevant to this process now? What do you know about your capacity to be self-aware **and** include the experience of another in a given moment? What do you understand your growing edges are with regard to this capacity?*

**Year 3:** *Thinking about your capacity to describe the multiple layers of your present experience (that is, sensation, emotion, cognition and action), in what ways have you developed these capacities since the start of the course? What do you understand about the impact of the broader field's (including your personal history) contributions to how you shape and regulate your present experience?*

**Year 4:** *As you sit with clients, what domains of here and now experience (sensations, emotions, cognition & actions) are you able to utilise, either implicitly or explicitly? What continues to feel harder to access and in need of ongoing development?*

## EMBODYING

**The Ability To Embody Experience Holistically:** to be able to experience yourself fully by noticing your somatic/embodied and sensory experience (as distinct from your emotional and cognitive experience). This includes the ability to give expression to your somatic and sensory experience in physical ways (e.g. laugh, cry, move, play, make physical contact). This also includes the ability to experience, stay present to and manage emotions: to be able to identify, articulate, tolerate, regulate and express your feelings as they emerge and are evoked relationally.

**Year 1:** *What do you know about the ways you currently embody your experience? What supports/constrains your embodiment? What do you know about your capacity to express your embodied experience in timely and congruent ways? How well do you identify, articulate and regulate your feelings?*

**Year 2:** *What feedback did you receive last year about your capacity for embodiment? How have you progressed in identifying, articulating and regulating your feelings/emotions? What do you know about your ability to utilize embodied experience in the service of contact with another? What has supported and constrained you in this?*

**Year 3:** *How have you made sense of feedback regarding your capacity for embodiment in the service of contact with the other? What helps you to notice when you have stopped attending to your embodied experience? To what extent are you able to draw on your embodied experience as a resource to identify your needs, tolerate challenging conversations and stay present to strong feelings?*

**Year 4:** *To what extent are you able to incorporate and apply your embodied experience in your client work, both in terms of how your embodied awareness informs your awareness and capacity as a practitioner, and how do you incorporate this into interventions with your clients? What are your strengths and what areas need further development?*

## **INTERRELATING**

**The Ability To Make And Sustain Relationships:** the ability to commit to dialogue: to be able to engage in respectful, compassionate, attuned and confirming communication with others - especially in relation to interpersonal difference and conflict, diversity and alternative perspectives. This includes the willingness to take responsibility for your behaviour and your impact on others. It also includes being aware of and understanding the experience of others and repairing ruptures in relationships should they occur, as well as the capacity to disclose immediate experience as relevant

**Year 1:** *How well do you make and sustain relationships with others? How do you manage: interpersonal conflict; disappointment; intimacy and loss in relationship? What are your habitual responses to these experiences? How available are you for difficult conversations?*

**Year 2:** *What feedback did you receive last year that was relevant to this capacity? What are the ways you habitually organise your experience to manage interpersonal differences, conflict, diversity and alternative perspectives etc. with others? What are familiar strengths and challenges when it comes to having difficult conversations or engaging with ruptures with others?*

*How have you modified/ changed /developed your habitual responses across the two years of this course? To what degree have you been available for relationships in this group?*

**Year 3:** *What new skills and awareness have emerged thus far in your capacity to hear, hold, respond and stay present to other's perspectives as well as your own?*

What awareness do you have of the influence of early attachment relationships on your creative adjustments and how you organize your experience?

**Year 4:** *Describe your core relational patterns and identify the ways in which they support your clinical practice and how they are likely to constrain your work with clients?*

## RESPONDING

**The Ability To Notice And Feel Affected By The Experience Of Living:** to be able to be impacted by the events of your life and your relationships with others and to be able to register this in your experience. This includes ability to make choices in everyday life, to be able to observe and assess the need for you to take action in your immediate world (environment) and to be able to predict and reflect on the consequences of you taking action.

**Year 1:** *How do you register (become embodied and aware) the impact of the environment and other people's needs, fears, and moods on you? How mindful are you of the way that this impact informs your decisions both moment-to-moment and across time?*

**Year 2:** *What feedback did you receive last year about your capacity to respond to your own experience and the experience of others? What has supported and constrained your capacity to respond this year? What have you learned this year about your capacity to engage in relationships in the group in ways that are that are responsive to yourself and others?*

**Year 3:** *What do you know about how you respond to others in the group? What feedback have you had so far about (a) how you impact on others and (b) how you let others impact you (e.g. allowing yourself to be supported and or differentiate)? How much of yourself do you bring to the group and what might support and constrain this?*

**Year 4:** Can you identify, describe and critique your patterns of arousal and response to life events and relationships with others with attention to how this shapes and informs awareness of therapeutic capacity, intentions and efficacy with clients?

## EXPERIMENTING

**The Ability To Learn Experientially:** to be able to be actively curious, inquisitive, open minded and involved in your immediate experience. This includes the ability to take risks and experiment with new behaviour: to be able to take opportunities, invent possibilities, make creative decisions, risk the unusual in order to move beyond your established patterns towards novel experiences of yourself and others.

**Year 1:** *Are you curious about your own experience? What does this curiosity support in your awareness of self and other? How do you best learn from your experience and create opportunities for novel (awareness enhancing) experience? How willing are you to take risks and step into challenges?*

**Year 2:** *What have you learned about your capacity to be curious towards your own and others' experience in the group? What have you learned about the value of your creative adjustments with respect to keeping safe, taking risks and stretching yourself?*

**Year 3:** *How has your curiosity supported you to approach situations differently in the group? What have you learnt about what supports or limits you in exploring new behaviours? What new behaviours have you been experimenting since the start of the course?*

**Year 4:** *To what extent are you able to incorporate your capacity for experimentation in your clinical work, particularly in terms of your ability to support the curiosity of your clients and their capacity to engage in experimentation to support increased awareness and novel situations?*

## **CONTEXTUALIZING**

**The Ability To Process Relational Experiences With Consideration For The Impact Of Personal Perspective, Mutual Influence And Context:** to be able to explore your experience with others with an appreciation that you are impacting others as they impact you **and** appreciate that while unfolding events are occurring in a contemporaneous context they are being influenced by the wider field, including the personal history and the current perspective of everyone involved.

**Year 1:** *In what ways do you include the broader contextual situation when exploring your own immediate experience? What do you easily include and what do you easily exclude? Do you think to include cultural, gender, sexual, socio-economic differences when relating and responding in novel situations?*

**Year 2:** *What feedback did you receive last year about your capacity to contextualise your experience? In what ways do you include the broader (social/political/cultural) context when exploring your immediate experience with others in large and smaller groups? What contextual factors have become more for figural for you this year in your relationships in the group? How has this supported or constrained your capacity to relate to others? What are the ways you hold an intention to promote safety in your interactions with others?*

**Year 3:** *What have you learnt about your capacity to hold the complexity of multiple contextual factors (e.g. History, race, gender, culture, power, privilege, class) in your interactions with others in the group? In what ways have you used this to assist your understanding of yourself and others?*

**Year 4:** *To what extent are you able to integrate a complex contextual sensitivity into your work a capacity both in terms of an appreciation of the more immediate factors that shape the unfolding experience of you and the client, and how the therapeutic container itself is likely to be shaped by broader contextual factors that include power, privilege and the impact of other political, cultural (race, gender, sexuality) and socio-economic factors?*

## **PRESENCE**

**The Ability To Be Self-Recognizing, Embodied And Responsive To Personal Experience And Present To The Experience Of Others:** to embody a relational therapeutic stance that draws on the here-and-now co-created experience of relating and hold a broader sense of the moment in a developmental (change) process. Understanding presence as the 'intentional use of self, combining energetic availability and fluid responsiveness within a dynamic relational field' (Marie-Anne Chidiac and Sally Denham-Vaughan), this ability is demonstrated by the capacity to be humble, wholehearted, responsive, transparent, flexible and creative

*Year 1: What qualities of presence do you imagine / know you embody? What supports and constrains your presence?*

*Year 2: What feedback have you had about how others experience your capacity for presence? How has this feedback influenced your ability to regulate presence? How has this supported and constrained the opportunity for connection and relationship?*

*Year 3: In what ways have you deepened or sustained your capacity for presence in relationship to yourself and others? What supports you to keep tracking your moment-to-moment experience of the field and with another?*

*Year 4: To what capacity are you able to stay attuned and present to your own experience, while maintaining a resonant and responsively present stance with the client? In what situations or client presentations do you find this challenging and how might you continue to develop this aspect of your practice?*

### **(3) Mid-Year Evaluation & Personal Abilities Reflection**

The task of this mid-year evaluation process is to help you reflect on your progress through the course by identifying areas of personal, theoretical and practice strength, growing edge and current development.

You will be expected to submit this as a written document to faculty at least two weeks before the Personal Abilities Feedback conversations conducted in June each year.

Faculty will give written comment/feedback and return a copy of this document plus feedback to you after the conversation. On the basis of faculty feedback, you may

want to modify your original document and it will be possible to re-submit the mid-year evaluation to faculty for further feedback.

***A copy of your final self-assessment with faculty feedback will be put in your academic file and used as a part of handover between course year levels.***

With reference to the PAF please answer the following questions:

***1. Under each heading, describe something of your developing sense of your personal abilities under the following headings. You may want to think about these in terms of strengths, growing edges and new learnings:***

Self-Recognizing

Embodying

Responding

Interrelating

Experimenting

Contextualizing

Presence

***2. Describe something of your experience of practice (skills development) aspects of the course so far this year. What stands out for you? What have you enjoyed and struggled with? What have you learned about yourself as a practitioner? Describe some useful feedback that you have received in your practice work. Say something of how it was useful.***

***3. Describe an element of the course theory that may be challenging for you. What ideas support your thinking about gestalt therapy and the role of the therapist?***

***4. As you consider the next semester (and future years of study/practice) name a goal and a support for each of these three areas:***

Personal Development (the person of the therapist)

Theoretical Development

Practice Development

### **FACULTY COMMENTS & FEEDBACK**

Comments on self-reflection including:

- (1) Strengths and Growing edges and;
- (2) Challenges and Specific Recommendations.