

The New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy: Training at an Institute that is Not a Training Institute

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The New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy (NYIGT) is the world’s first Gestalt therapy institute, but it is not a training institute in the usual sense of the word. We never had a training program with a sequence of required courses leading to a certificate. New York City has Gestalt therapy institutes with formal training programs that grant certificates to graduates¹. They have offices and paid staff. The institute never had office. We are an entirely volunteer organization. When we had a telephone, it merely functioned for voice mail. Members would take turns responding to messages. Now people contact us through our website (www.newyorkgestalt.org) or via email, (info@nyigt.org) For more than 70 years, we’ve met in brick-and-mortar rooms rented on an *ad hoc* basis. Now as a consequence of Covid and in recognition of the multinational nature of our members, our meetings are online, in person, or a hybrid of the two. These days our members are from the United States, Canada, Central and South America, Europe, Asia, and Australia.

A teaching/learning community

The NYIGT is not a training institute, yet therapists are trained “at” the institute. This has always been so otherwise on what basis could we rightly claim to be the headwaters of the rivers of Gestalt therapy that now flow everywhere? Almost all Gestalt therapists today can trace the source of their understanding of Gestalt therapy back to the NYIGT.

¹ The practice of psychotherapy in the United States is regulated by each individual state. States generally license psychotherapists by profession, such as psychiatry, clinical psychology, clinical social work, mental health counselor and so on – not by their modality of practice. The only exception is the psychoanalysis, which is recognized as a separate profession in New York State. Insurance reimbursement (government or private) is also dependent on the provider’s profession, not modality.

For almost 75 years, we've been holding seminars, study groups, workshops, training, practicum, conferences and now we have an internet discussion group on the theory/practice of gestalt therapy. We are known for using the classic model of the founding text, *Gestalt Therapy, Excitement and growth in the Human Personality* by Fritz Perls, Ralph Hefferline, and Paul Goodman (1951), as the starting place for our continuing development of gestalt therapy. While we respect the classic model, we encourage one another to challenge and reformulate it to reflect our ongoing understanding of gestalt therapy theory/practice. Our founding text is no longer the authority of us, but provides a theory of reference for our contemporary approaches.

We are a "teaching/learning community," loosely structured and fluidly organized as an-going "experiment" in developing gestalt therapy from within its historical foundation. Studying Gestalt therapy is a teaching/learning process as a field event -- an emergent function of the contact-boundary. (Bloom 2009). Teaching and learning Gestalt therapy are aspects of a contact-boundary phenomena. Learning occurs at the meeting of teacher and student; the student teaches through asking questions and the teacher learns by creatively responding to the student's concerns.

As a consequence, both "teacher" and "student" remain creatively engaged in contacting Gestalt therapy theory/practice – and Gestalt therapy remains alive rather than codified. We understand this to be a process of discovery of the organism-environment field, that is, of the embodied phenomenal field of the NYIGT. This is a non-hierarchical approach to learning. Teaching/learning, then, emerge as figures of interest in a field of excitement and support rather, than from the set structure of a curriculum.

This kind of liquidity assures that Gestalt therapy remains of the developing field — personal, social, political, cultural and historical

Our "training" is a function of the process of membership in the institute. Actually, it is what it means to be an active member of

the institute, to participate in our meetings, to engage in our discussions, and so on. This notion of "training" gestalt therapy is in our DNA. While we grant no certificates, we do recognize the developing expertise of our members. I will explain this in more detail, below.

First person narratives from some current members of the institute will help me describe the development of the institute as an embodiment of these values. The inherent risk in any narrative is to concretize an on-going process. Yet the institute the institute constantly creatively-adjusts to its members and the field conditions of the wider world. Our loose structure frees us to reorganize our self as we respond to changing circumstances. Change is our constant. We are sharply aware of the ever-changing world situation. This is reflected in our sense of how we are responsive to whatever confronts us. Over our life as an institute, we made significant changes to our structure as the needs of our members and the very nature of Gestalt therapy changed

In the beginning

It wasn't until 1951 that Gestalt therapy became a "trainable" modality. By then, Fritz and Laura Perls had already established themselves within in New York City. Fritz had trained some people in NYC and Los Angeles in his new approach. Fritz eventually left New York and left the institute to Laura and others to develop.

[In the early 1950's] Gestalt Therapy was beginning to have a reputation within the profession. The William Alanson White Institute [a prestigious New York City psychotherapy institute] remained friendly and was sending trainees, Word spread among the likeminded... When *Gestalt Therapy* came out in December 1951, new converts were made ... The time was ripe and Perls decided to start his own institute. (Stoehr, 1994, p. 150)

Laura started a "professional group," whose nucleus included Paul Goodman, then her patient, Eliot Shapiro, and Paul Weisz.

Soon, Fritz and Laura announced an "open house." About forty people arrived. Fritz and Laura divided these people into two groups, and each led one. They were the first sprouts of the Gestalt seed planted (Richard Kitzler², personal communication,1998)

This loosely structured group established the form that continues to today. "Courses" were "offered." That is, someone, Paul Goodman, for example, would declare that he would lead a course such as "Psychotherapy, Religion and Ethics," A bulletin would announce this seminar and people would come to thrash about in the Goodman way (Stoehr, 1994, pp. 154, 156) Over the

years, the bulletin became “the brochure” that announced offerings by the institute. This practice continued — off and on — for forty years. No one recalls how often “on” and how often “off.”³

In 1970, this organization without formal structure⁴ began to adopt a formal structure. It was officially certified as a Not-For-Profit Corporation by New York State in 1970. The institute’s purpose, now part of the Certificate of Incorporation is,

to formulate, develop, and popularize procedures and techniques in the theory, practice and programming of Gestalt therapy through research, meetings, programs, writings, lectures, and similar means. . . (*Certificate of Incorporation of the New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy Inc.* filed with the New York State Education Department, June 25, 1970)

In 1972, as required by law, by-laws were adopted that established the governance of the NYIGT. Membership categories were codified. There were Fellows, Members, and Associates.

² Richard Kitzler (1927 – 2009) was part of this group from the beginning. He became a Fellow sometime in the early 1960’s.

³ Offerings are now listed on our website.

⁴ Although by now the senior or original members ran the institute as the self-declared “Fellows”. The others were “Members.” The latter had no say.

Institute structure as a function of teaching/learning

Fellows, full members, associates

Fellows governed the NYIGT in all respects until the late 1980's. Their power was absolute. Under the 1972 by-laws, they (as the Board of Directors) had the power to terminate all Associate and Full memberships each year and to renew them each year. This council kept no records, and its meetings were closed to the membership.

“The Fellows approved course offerings.” (Humphrey⁵, personal communication, 2013) and by unknown criteria, approved associate members into full member status. Full members were deemed to be fully trained gestalt therapists, could train other therapists, and receive referrals from Fellows and other full members. “Fellows adjusted their ranks according to their needs.” (Humphrey, personal communication, 2013).

The transition from Associate to Full Member is the ritual of recognition within the institute that a person has become a “trained” Gestalt therapist who is eligible to receive referrals for therapy, supervision, and teaching, changed over the years in substantial ways.

Under the 1972 by-laws, Fellows alone decided who was adequately trained as a Gestalt therapist based upon standards known only to them and in meetings closed to everyone else

The protocol seemed to be Associate Members needed to ask a Fellow to sponsor them for Full Membership. As I was leaving Richard's Wednesday. Seminar and he asked all of us if we had any instructions/requests for the Fellows who were meeting that evening. I said, partly in jest: "Yes, make me a Full Member." the next day Richard called to tell me I was a Full Member. (Humphrey, personal communication, 2013)

⁵ Karen Humphrey became a Fellows in 1980.

But the interest of the Fellows in this absolute power wane. New additions to the Council of Fellows brought people to the governing body who were sensitive to the social dimensions of the organization. Patrick Kelley was an accomplished group leader and had experience with youth gangs. Karen Humphrey was in tune with the social activism of the civil rights, anti-Viet Nam War, and women's movements. More senior Fellows became less interested in holding the reigns so tightly and more or less withdrew.

The fading of the Fellow's absolute power was also a reflection of the change in the group culture itself as an inevitable consequence of the very theory we studied. The absurdity of an egalitarian modality run by a closed hierarchy became untenable. Gestalt therapy's focus was shifting from a one-person approach to one that saw relationships itself as figural. The members more and more focused on group process. A theory of non-hierarchical group interactive leadership emerged and within this model, the membership began to assert more and more authority. A committee was formed to reexamine the structure of the institute, and its work culminated in a new configuration.

In the late 1980's, Fellows turned governance of the institute the over to its members. Fellows no longer directed the institute through closed meetings and, among other changes⁶, standards by which "training" could be evaluated was introduced. The progression from associate to Full Member became a transparent consensus process open to the membership. This change in leadership from the fixed structure of the Council of Fellows to the non-hierarchical membership-as-a-whole occurred within the process of the teaching/learning of the institute. Power was deconstructed from a Gestalt therapy perspective and a new figure emerged. This process was a training process for the entire membership.

From Associate to Full Member as the mark of being a trained gestalt therapist:

⁶ A by-law change accepted by the Fellows transferred governance of the NYIGT to the membership and abolished the Council of Fellows.

The newly configured institute more or less began from scratch. Once again, its members reiterated the NYIGT was not a training institute, but place where we could learn from and teach each other, debate and explore issues in Gestalt therapy theory, share our questions and exchange our ideas. This became a place where we could pursue the development of Gestalt therapy theory and its application to new areas. And this was place where one can find recognition along the journey toward becoming a fully trained and competent Gestalt therapist.

[We want] an institute accessible to all – the novice those trained in other therapies, and those from other disciplines such as the sciences, the arts etc. . . . (*Compendium By-Law*, 1998, pp6,)

Associate Members and Full Members and newly egalitarian Fellows governed the institute. Criteria for Full Membership were discussed in the early meetings. Full members would be someone already known as part of the institute, someone personally sponsored, someone thoroughly trained, with competence in theory and practice, someone to whom members were comfortable to send referrals, someone who had enough therapy to be “significantly contactful.” someone, whose dues are paid, and someone not in conflict with the ethics of the institute. Certificates of training were neither asked for nor granted.

This standard guided the transition of what soon were called Associate to Full Membership. It was applied loosely until formalized in a by-law in 2009.

Now a person presented him or herself as a candidate for Full Membership at an open meeting and answered questions concerning his or her qualifications.

⁷ In 2009, the by-laws were amended to reinstate Fellows as an honorific category of membership. The process of full members becoming Fellows roughly follows that of full membership. Fellows are acknowledged for advanced experience, expertise, writing, and other achievements to advance the purpose of the NYIGT

mentorship and self-directed training

Karen Humphrey practiced gestalt therapy for more than forty years. She is a fellow of the institute. “My first experience of gestalt therapy was as a patient of Laura Perls in 1962.” Karen continues,

I began attending the monthly meetings of the NYIGT. At one meeting I suggested that it would be helpful for people interested in learning Gestalt therapy if there were a more structured way of going about it. *Paul Goodman laughed, and then pronounced that part of gestalt therapy training was making it up for oneself.* (Humphrey, 2013) emphasis added

This unstructured self-directed learning followed a mentorship model. When students expressed interest in a certain topic, they would approach an experienced Gestalt therapist to see if he or she was interested in leading a seminar, training group or practicum. Or when an experienced teacher had an interest, he or she announced this to the community. Each teacher had his or own requirements of his or her training group – and typically all that a person need show was interest in learning gestalt therapy. Members were asked take responsibility for our own training needs.

Eric Werthman began study at the institute in the 1980’s He writes,

What made the Institute so wonderful is that you could study — i.e. “work”— with any of the fellows and/or full members of the institute in a tutorial or group setting if they were willing to accept to you. I could pick who I wanted to study with and the two of us created the “course” between us, which included who we thought we should “read” and how to apply that my cases. (Werthman, personal communication, 2013)

Describing the institute, Karen writes,

[T]hroughout the 1960’s Laura Perls and Isadore From [of the first generation of trainers] were the New York Institute’s significant teachers of Gestalt therapy theory and practice. There was no formal endpoint to my work with either of them. There seemed to be an understanding that self-designated students pass among self-designated teachers. (Humphrey, personal communication, 2013)

I first trained in 1976 was in Patrick Kelley's practicum. I and others were rank beginners, most of whom had no clinical experience or training at all. At the time I was a practicing restless and unsatisfied attorney. The NYIGT and Gestalt therapy drew me like a magnet. After a while, Patrick encouraged me to study with Richard Kitzler. Patrick knew I had a background in philosophy and literature. Richard would be a perfect fit. Richard encouraged me to study with Isadore From and Laura Perls. So, yes, as was Karen, I was passed among teachers. Richard Kitzler remained my mentor throughout — until his death in 2009.

Graduates of other Gestalt therapy institutes study at the institute under this mentorship model. Ruella Frank came to Gestalt therapy itself with a diverse background in developmental and somatic psychology. She writes,

After attending a four-year gestalt therapy training program in NYC, I had the good fortune to discover and then train with the faculty from the New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy. In 1986, I joined Laura Perls weekly theory-practice group that met every Tuesday and stayed with her until her death in 1991. With Laura, I learned the brilliance of classical gestalt theory and saw it beautifully practiced. (Frank, personal communication, 2013)

And,

In the first months of her group, I heard the name Richard Kitzler mentioned time after time. He was a well-respected teacher of theory and mentored students line-by-line through the pages of PHG. I was smitten with Richard's brilliance and generosity, and I studied with him in private classes weekly and sometimes study groups from 1987 until 1997, and then less often but consistently until his death in 2010. The experience with Laura and Richard were the richest learning experiences I've ever had. (Frank, personal communication, 2013)

Susan Gregory, who became a full member in the 1990's. In her words, she brought

a deep background in working with and helping people as both a singing teacher and a teacher of English as a second language. In studying Gestalt therapy, I stood on the ground of 32 years of study and practice in a bodywork modality named "*Arbeit am Menschen*", which, it turned

out, both Laura and Fritz had practiced for a time. To this I added the science of 12 semesters of experiential anatomy taught by Irene Dowd.

She further writes that

in addition to NYIGT training groups and practicums she attended, my learning was enriched by monthly Institute meetings on various topics presented by senior members or guests, as well as by many weekend workshops I attended. (Gregory, personal communication, 2013)

Susan's last point must be underscored and perhaps sums up the essence of training at the institute. Our monthly and other meetings are the places in which we live-out our understanding of Gestalt therapy, put it into action with one another, give flesh and bones to our ideas, and substance to community itself. "Training" is our "doing." We "do" together is supported by the group process of this institute that is committed to the creativity at the heart of courageous contacting.

This sounds idealistic. It is. It sounds hard to achieve. It is. We don't always succeed. But as the founding Gestalt therapy institute, the NYIGT, I think, has a duty to be idealistic

Conclusion

The NYIGT is not a training institute but has always trained Gestalt therapists. It developed from an unstructured gathering of people curious about gestalt therapy stumbling and growing through experiments in forms of organization to what it is now. We developed into a teaching/learning community that is a community of our members-as-a-whole. Anyone from anywhere is welcome to become a member by paying dues. Our members are from as world as Australia and Ukraine, of Spain and Poland, France and Italy, Sweden and the United Kingdom, Mexico and Brazil, Canada and Taiwan. We are all members of an institute, that is no longer circumscribed its physical location, but now an institute whose horizon's span is only limited by the constraints of the internet. geographic borders. We are all members of the New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy. The implications of being a techno- phenomenological community is very much on our minds.

"Training" and "teaching/learning" change along with the needs that call out for them—even to an online community. The NYIGT has been committed to

respond creatively to these needs and to maintain a unique place in the world of Gestalt therapy institutes.

I hope this short paper has given a sufficient account of our attempts to fulfill this commitment.

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biography

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