

This piece by Cathie O'Brien an organisational consultant, psychotherapist and supervisor, illustrates the application of ROG to educational settings and children's services in the U.K. The key theory maps are Self/Other/Situation (SOS) with a focus on Self and ethical presence.

Cathie O'Brien: How do I use ROG in educational settings/children's services?

I work predominantly from a relational, embodied, attuned and non-verbal perspective, and promote this way of working to other professionals who work with vulnerable children and young people in educational settings and children's homes. This approach is not often favoured at a time when relational aspects of work are being disregarded in many organisations, favouring outcome measures, manualised interventions and robotic organisational functions. I found in ROG a real support for my way of working. Both the theory base (in particular the self/other/situation (SOS)), and the use of self as instrument were particularly illuminating.

Self/other/situation leading to presence could be described as both a complex and simple theoretical model. Any Gestalt practitioner reading this may understand it at a complex level, involving the three cornerstones of gestalt - phenomenology, dialogue, and field theory. They may also understand each of these at a deeper level, with this process leading to contact. However, they may not necessarily understand how this process leads to a state of presence in self and potentially other. Some practitioners can mistake dissociation (lost in self, lost in other), for presence whilst the other could experience this as unavailable, distant, blank screen etc which could be anxiety provoking.

SOS however teaches disciplined awareness, a state of being ethically present, the ability to be in a state of self/other/situation simultaneously. As someone who has played top level team sport, I describe this as being in the zone, the ability for the mind and body to work simultaneously with the whole situation and team. Once you become technical your game goes out of the window. The technical aspects, which are called set pieces, are practiced during training, just the same as training in ROG or other courses. However, the skill is in integrating those technical set pieces with the whole body, relational and situational experience, something that is rarely taught in training, and being able to pass this on to others. Here lies the simplicity of SOS. When working with organisations this is a useful way of 'being' for the organisational practitioner. In children's services, working with extremely vulnerable and challenging families and young people, I also want teams to learn ethical and disciplined presence for themselves. However, the above gestalt language would potentially be too complex for them to understand and they would just switch off. The Self/other/situation is a model the layman can understand, it doesn't alienate nor sound elitist in any way shape or form, it's not frightening, and it makes sense. They are able to understand the technical set pieces (explicit), while also being with a gestalt practitioner who uses self as instrument (implicit) – working at both a technical and relational level. This is the aforementioned attunement, embodiment, sometimes non-verbal, other times feedback or validating aspects, eventually leading to presence - at this point they feel this naturally for themselves. In a sports environment this is when everything you have learnt comes together; it is integrated at a mind/ body/ environment/team level, once felt it is never forgotten. This is also called contact in gestalt and described as growth, change, integration, and assimilation. This can develop a feeling of self-support in individuals and groups as they carry this felt sense with them. They embody what they have learnt, and you can see this in their grounded confidence and calm energy. Again, people often notice this in athletes, they have a physical presence and confidence which others find hard to understand and mistakenly believe they

have little technical, left brain ability. This is because they make it look easy and natural, this is flow.

For individuals in children's services who work with very vulnerable children and families, this way of being is extremely helpful for both staff and young people. This groundedness, calm energy, self-awareness and ethical presence can help to calm the other, when working with families, multi-agency professionals or children and young people. Rather than being out of awareness and potentially mirroring the other's anxiety, fear, anger, and terror, potentially feeling frightened or frightening to the other, the individual can positively impact the other/environment through use of self. Their ethical and disciplined awareness of self/other/situation leading to a state of presence can finely attune to the relational dance at both an explicit and implicit level – leading to contact and potentially growth.

This is the art of gestalt and many who read gestalt can be put off by its complex language, however, I would encourage people to read gestalt from a place of presence and if you are unsure how to do this at this stage, just read without judgement to start with and allow it to flow. I also however believe it is useful to decode the richness of gestalt, and ROG does this while maintaining its integrity and artistry and making it accessible to all.

Cathie O'Brien



Cathie practices as a Gestalt Psychotherapist, Supervisor and ROG Practitioner. She has 35 years' experience working in the fields of social care and mental health, at both a senior leadership and practitioner level, within the NHS, Social Care, Education and Private sectors. She specialises in working with organisations who work with very vulnerable and challenging young people and adults and here she also integrates attachment, trauma, and the neurosciences with Gestalt. She describes her early life as living very much in the physical realm working with horses and teaching horse riding, followed by playing top level indoor volleyball, representing England, and coaching at a national league level. These days she still enjoys the earthy, mucky, outdoors, growing organic veg, walking and horse riding, all of which informs her work now, especially non-verbal communication, attunement, presence, and teamwork from the perspective of rhythm, flow, and team presence.

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