My Early Engagement with Humanistic Psychology

John Heron

SYNOPSIS
I have been invited by the editors to contribute an article with the above title to Self and Society. I cover the period from 1970 to 1985, which includes: the launch of the Human Potential Research Project and its humanistic extramural programmes at the University of Surrey; the start of co-counselling in the UK and Europe and the birth of Co-counselling International; humanistic innovations in postgraduate medical education at the University of London; the dawn, development and coming of age of the participatory action-research method of co-operative inquiry; the founding and humanistic psychology diploma work of the independent Institute for the Development of Human Potential; strategies of soft revolution; and the grounding value of comradeship. The interacting triad of autonomy, co-operation and hierarchy is a theme that runs through the whole.

The Launch of the Human Potential Research Project
Humanistic Psychology (HP) arrived in the UK, as an experiential force, with a large minilab held at the Inn on the Park Hotel, in London in March 1970. The event was sponsored by Leslie Elliott. Immediately after it, he provided the premises for Quaesitor, the first growth centre in Europe, run by Pat and Paul Lowe, which I attended several times in the summer of 1970. In November of that year, I founded the Human Potential Research Project (HPRP) at the University of Surrey, the first academic base for Humanistic Psychology and education in Europe. The launch of HPRP was occasioned by an unexpected and unusual turn of events.

Inspired by my liberating experiences at Quaesitor, yet with considerable trepidation, in September of 1970 I took seven senior police officers of Superintendent rank on a two-day journey of experiential exercises exploring the interface between their humanity and their professional role. This was the start of a five-day course at the University of Surrey, where I was on the intramural academic staff. The course was put on at the request of the Assistant Chief Constable of Surrey Police – to build relations between town and gown – and the university had asked me to help out by running the opening sessions.

I offered the officers a choice between two days of lectures and discussions on ‘man management’ – a topic much in vogue at the time – and two days of the experiential inquiry mentioned above, which I briefly outlined and which, I said, would require courage from all of us: courage from me because I had never done this before with persons of their status, and courage from them, because of the risks of radical self-disclosure before their peers. When they heard the word ‘courage’ they lined up to a man at the deep end to take the plunge.

At the end of the five days, the officers had a review session voicing their evaluation of the course as a whole. I
The work of the HPRP team and myself, with dynamic links with David James and his staff, and with discreet links with the Vice-Chancellor and his office, constituted a form of participatory action research within the community of the university into its potential for actualising some degree of humanistic change.

I owed David James a great debt of gratitude. He provided me with consistent and unwavering support through all the vicissitudes of the early days, fending off much intramural hostility towards the HPRP. I am also grateful to a small team of HPRP associates whom I recruited from postgraduate and undergraduate students aroused by the arrival of HP in the UK. Indeed, it was one of them who first alerted me to the opening of Quaesitor. I found the team members invaluable for talking through ideas, and for discussing issues arising from work in progress.

On the strength of this unprecedented recommendation, I proposed to David James, Head of the university’s extramural Centre for Adult Education, that I set up, within his Centre, the Human Potential Research Project to develop person-centred research methods and to provide experiential education for other professions, organisations and the general public. With the approval of the Vice-Chancellor, David agreed and the HPRP was born. And thus I learned one of the practical principles of soft revolution: significant change for those in one arm of the establishment can provide leverage for introducing significant change for those in another.

It also helps to have a luminary leader. Peter Leggett, the Vice-Chancellor, was at that time one of a group of four key players engaged in ongoing radical discussions which eventually led to the founding in 1973 of the Scientific and Medical Network (which is still thriving today), a forum for doctors and scientists to dialogue about issues – considered taboo in orthodox thought – such as non-local consciousness, alternative forms of healing and paranormal phenomena. These unorthodox interests, I believe, contributed – along with the police officers’ deputation – to his discreet backing of my initiative.

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Their youth and vision, unrestrained by narrow academic convention, was a guiding inspiration. They would participate in general public events or postgraduate students, but if they happened to get involved, they were welcome. So our publicity went exclusively to the general public and professional groups in the surrounding community.

In order to explore this kind of person-centred participatory inquiry in practice, elements of it were progressively incorporated into the Project’s experiential learning programmes through the 1970s. By the start of the 1980s the method had developed into full-blown cooperative inquiry, as I explain in a later section.

The Project associates, who were drawn from the student body, understood and accepted the extramural focus. They would participate in general public events which appealed to them, and they also sometimes helped out in supportive roles in the facilitation of events for...
my guiding definition of love, for professional facilitators and helpers, was ‘to provide conditions within which people can in liberty determine their own true needs and interests in co-operation with others who are similarly engaged’. It is a definition which points to the interdependence of autonomy and co-operation, emerging within a fertile context created by the hierarchy of benign facilitation. These are three basic and complex values in all forms of human association, and can be defined in their simplest form, respectively, as deciding for oneself, deciding with others, and deciding for others.

The next year, 1971–2, I added a 20-week, one evening a week, training course in co-counselling. Earlier in the year I had attended workshops in London in this form of peer self-help emotional development, run by Tom Scheff, a professor of sociology at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Tom was also in the UK to continue his research into the anti-psychiatry work of R.D. Laing and others. Before returning to the USA, he asked me if I would be willing to organise a local co-counselling community and launch more training workshops.

Co-counselling takes emotional growth out of the domain of therapy and into the arena of affective education and training. The sole role of the teacher/trainer is to provide structure for the client to develop skills of autonomous self-help in working with emotions, and for the counsellor to acquire skills which facilitate this process in the client. Once again, hierarchy serves the progressive emergence of a co-creative interaction between autonomy and co-operation. I ran the 20-week course as a participatory experiential inquiry; and the element of reflective inquiry built into the co-counselling training was a primitive precursor of the co-operative inquiry method which developed into full form some years later.

In the third year, 1972–3, I started working with the medical profession, training experienced GPs to become trainers of young hospital doctors entering General Practice. When the senior GP course-organisers first approached me about a course, I said they should only work with me if they were seriously interested in my educational model: the programme would be co-designed by the organisers, the participants and myself, negotiating to include our various concerns and interests; and that my concerns included not only this participative decision-making, but also a significant element of experiential learning, using structured exercises of various kinds. They nervously agreed to the model.

The course took off, and became a powerful arena of experiential learning and participatory inquiry, especially through the use of role play to differentiate between facilitative (you tell me) and authoritative (I tell you) interventions in the GPs’ relations both with their trainees and with their patients. In those days, most of the GPs could not really tell the difference: every initial attempt to be facilitative got compulsively skewed into an authoritative form (e.g. ‘Don’t you think that what you really ought to do with this patient is...’). This and the subsequent GP training-the-trainers courses were where I first developed my six category intervention model of interpersonal skills (Heron 1975, 2001), which has since been widely adopted in diverse fields.

Further Developments of Experiential Learning and Participatory Inquiry

Through 1973–81, I continued to use aspects of participatory inquiry in experiential workshops on a wide range of topics: the elements of human communication and encounter; intrapsychic states and processes; interpersonal and professional skills; facilitation training; group dynamic phenomena; peer self-help networks; peer learning community; peer review audit of professional practice; humanistic education; humanistic medicine; and transpersonal psychology. There were forays into organisational development with the Home Office, Rank Xerox, Lloyds Bank; educational development with South West London College and other tertiary institutions; staff development in a number of different hospital and therapeutic settings.

Other unfolding themes at this time were: a first account of the six dimensions of facilitator style, developed in the facilitator training courses (for the latest version, see Heron, 1999); the application of first-person and peer experiential inquiry in the burgeoning field of transpersonal psychology to counter dogmatic intuitionism and authoritarianism in spiritual schools and traditions; an interim account of experiential research method, which affirmed the interdependence...
"...a high percentage of the participating doctors were liberated into new vistas of thought and practice, and medically empowered in a patient-centred way...."
co-facilitate an externally initiated co-operative inquiry (see Heron, 1996: 41) into whole-person medicine for 16 experienced GP’s. This ran for nine months through 1982–3. We met every six weeks for a long weekend to review and reflect on the innovations of medical practice applied in the previous weeks (Heron and Reason, 1985). Prior to this, there was a preliminary weekend at which we worked out a provisional model of whole-person medicine. It included a statement about the integration of body, mind and spirit.

When it came to planning the third six-week action cycle, one subgroup said ‘Look, our model includes this idea of integrating body-mind-spirit, but what does this mean in practice in the NHS in our consulting room?’. So they contracted to try out different sorts of spiritual intervention for six weeks, and review and revise them at the subsequent reflection weekend. Another sub-group elected to explore methods of power-sharing with patients. Between them the two sub-groups took on two of the most radical transformations of medical practice. Patrick Pietroni and some of the other doctors participating in our inquiry went on to create the British Holistic Medical Association. At the same time, another group of doctors from the BPMF and I co-founded the Research Council for Complementary Medicine.

Co-operative Inquiry Comes of Age

In 1978 Peter Reason, John Rowan and I launched the New Paradigm Research Group, which provided a major forum for the development of humanistic research thinking. The highly creative discussions within this group were a great stimulus to my own research reflections. They also led to Peter and John editing Human Inquiry: A Sourcebook of New Paradigm Research (Reason and Rowan, 1981). I contributed two chapters updating the theory and practice of co-operative inquiry, which were the foundation for full-blown applications of the method from 1978 and through the 1980s (Heron, 1981a, b).

Peter Reason became a firm supporter of my updated model, and co-initiated with me two co-operative inquiries with experienced co-counsellors, and the whole-person medicine inquiry with GPs as outlined above. The two co-counselling inquiries, published as HPRP monographs in 1981 and 1982, were for me particularly significant. They brought to practical fruition the theoretical aspirations of my 1971 paper on ‘Experience and method’ outlined in the second section, above.

I launched two early altered-state inquiries – one in 1978 on spatio-temporal extensions of consciousness, the other in 1981 on impressions of the other reality, followed from 1990 onwards by a wide range of inquiries into participatory spirituality. For references for these and many other co-operative inquiries, and for the further expansion and development of the method into the 1990s and beyond, see Heron (1996, 1998, 2006), Reason (1994), Heron and Reason (2001, 2008), and Heron and Lahood (2008).

Peter Reason has been particularly influential in supporting the practice and the spread of co-operative inquiry through his Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice at the University of Bath, from which he retired in 2009. He helped co-operative inquiry find its place within the growing family of action research methods (Reason and Bradbury, 2001, 2008).

Co-operative inquiry has gradually aroused worldwide interest, with researchers contacting me over the years from the UK, USA, Canada, Australia, Mexico, Finland, Denmark, New Zealand, Singapore, South Africa, India and elsewhere. It has come of age with this basic format, which is simple to describe, challenging to initiate and deeply rewarding to practise.

All those involved work together as co-researchers and as co-subjects. They both design, manage and draw conclusions from the inquiry, and they undergo the experience and action that is being explored, using cycles of reflection and action. Each cycle of reflection and action has four phases:

- In Phase 1, as co-researchers participants agree on the focus of their inquiry, and develop together a set of questions they wish to investigate. They plan a method for exploring this focal idea in action, through practical experience. And they devise and agree a set of procedures for gathering and recording data from this experience.

- In Phase 2, as co-subjects, they engage in actions agreed, and observe and record the process and outcomes of their experience. They are careful to notice the subtleties of experience, to hold lightly the conceptual frame from which they started so that they begin to see how practice does and does not conform to their original ideas.

- Phase 3 is the touchstone of the inquiry method. The co-subjects become deeply immersed in, and engaged with, their practical experience. They develop a degree of openness to what is going on that is so free of preconceptions, that they see it in a new way.
In Phase 4, the co-researchers re-assemble to share their experiential data from Phases 2 and 3, and to reconsider their original ideas in the light of it. As a result, they may develop or reframe these ideas; or reject them and pose new questions. They then plan the next cycle of action: they may choose to converge on the same aspect, or diverge on different aspects, of the overall inquiry; they may choose to change their inquiry procedures – forms of action, ways of gathering data – in the light of experience.

This cycle, between reflection and action, is repeated several times, so that early discoveries tentatively reached can be checked and developed, investigation of one aspect of the inquiry can be related to exploration of other parts, new skills can be acquired and monitored. Experiential competences are realised; the group itself becomes more cohesive and self-critical, more skilled in its work.

Repeat cycling, balancing divergence and convergence, enhances the validity of the findings, as does increasing congruence between the four ways of knowing involved – affective, imaginal, conceptual and practical. Additional validity procedures are used during the inquiry: some of these counter unaware projection and consensus collusion; others monitor authentic collaboration, the balance between reflection and action, and between chaos and order.

**Alternative Education Centres**

The HPRP within the University of Surrey, and the Education Department within the BPMF of the University of London, were – as I said earlier – alternative education centres within their respective academic institutions. They offered no university diplomas, certificates or degrees for any of their courses. I chose this as a matter of deliberate policy, for both universities would have insisted on unilateral assessment as a non-negotiable precondition for granting any university qualification. And such assessment was incompatible with the kind of in-depth whole-person education which these centres practised. Fortunately, a more radical full-blown alternative approach was already under way.

For in the winter of 1976, in London, five of us – David Blagden Marks, Tom Feldberg, Frank Lake, Kate Hopkinson and myself – had begun discussions to found the entirely independent Institute for the Development of Human Potential (IDHP), to run two-year part-time courses, integrating experiential and theoretical learning, and offering a Diploma in Humanistic Psychology, awarded on the basis of the rigorous practice of self and peer assessment by students trained in the method throughout the course by the course facilitators.

The original vision and initiative to create the IDHP came from David Blagden Marks, the second director of Quaesitor. A year after the IDHP launch in 1977, David, a single-handed transatlantic yachtsman, was drowned in a severe storm when crossing the Irish sea, after setting sail on the basis of a highly inaccurate weather report. As we reeled from this tragedy, I took the rudder and became chairperson of the IDHP for a period, as we refined our educational ideology and method. Tom Feldberg initiated the first IDHP two-year course through Quaesitor in 1977, and I initiated the second through the HPRP in 1978. Many other distinguished colleagues ran IDHP courses over the years in Cornwall, Bath, Surrey, London and Yorkshire.

The IDHP and its 25 years of educational pioneering were celebrated by four articles in *Self and Society* in 2001 (vol. 29, no. 2, June–July). The Institute has consistently affirmed, among other things, the following: experiential learning, in the spirit of inquiry, as the ground of multi-faceted integral learning – personal, interpersonal, political/social change, spiritual; emotional competence as a prerequisite for facilitative skills (the interdependence of personal and professional development); the intentional and empowering interplay of hierarchy, co-operation and autonomy in the relation between facilitators and participants, and in the unfolding of course dynamics; the application of self and peer assessment as the sole basis of accreditation.

What is so important about self and peer assessment, and using it as a basis for diploma accreditation, is that it affirms to society at large that the validating authority for personal-cum-professional-cum-spiritual development lies primarily within the depths of each individual person, where that person is profoundly engaged with other persons in the developmental process, and where that person is within an educational culture that promotes the cultivation of integral learning and self and peer assessment skills. Autonomous self-assessment is set in a context of rigorous peer assessment and institutional training. The autonomy is interdependent with peer process and institutional hierarchy. This interacting triad of autonomy, co-operation and hierarchy (Heron, 1999) is a theme that runs through my whole work, and is, perhaps, a key to the dynamics of the possible emergence of a peer-to-peer culture in the future.

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my use of experiential learning on the campus. Even
though my radical work was all done in the extramural
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staff were very agitated that it was being done under
the auspices of the university. Indeed, the undercurrent
of upset got so intense that Roger Simon, the Anglican
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am grateful to this day for Roger's intervention.
A later instance at Surrey was when I heard that an
unnamed senior figure within the university had received
a vigorous forbidding critique from a senior and influential
figure in another university, discrediting the work I was
doing. I eventually tracked down and went to see the first
of these, who turned out to be Lewis Elton, a professor
running the Department of Educational Technology. He
obligingly revealed the identity of the second figure, who
was head of the Counselling Service in the University of
London. Lewis was eager to see the confrontation, so he
set up the meeting in Gower Street in London, drove me
to it and sat through it as a silent witness, clearly relishing
every minute.
My critic raised his concerns, I presented my case,
and asked if he had a grasp of the extensive research
about the approach I was adopting. It turned out that he
had not. He then revealed, in response to my questioning
him, some controversial and radical methods he was
using with some of his psychotherapy and counselling
clients. Thereafter, we had a congenial discussion on
matters of mutual interest. A couple of months later, he
invited me to be a keynote speaker at a conference he
was organising. Lewis was delighted with all this, and
asked me to facilitate a session with him, his staff and
postgraduate students. The significance of this story lies
in the strange and roundabout forms which resistance to
change can take.
1. I have learned over the years that whenever
negative and ill-informed criticisms of radical change
are circulating, it is essential to search out the person
who is their source and firmly and politely confront him
or her with the correct information, while seeking to
develop a constructive dialogue about the basic issues
involved. I used this approach at both the Universities
of Surrey and London, and found it both necessary and
invaluable. At Surrey I was alerted to the importance of
this strategy by an unexpected ally.
2. Appeal to the precedent set by one arm of the
establishment in order to innovate within the arm of
the establishment with which you are involved. I have
already illustrated this in my opening story of launching
the HPRP at the University of Surrey on the basis of
making a radical impact on senior officers of Surrey
Police. Another example occurred at the BPMF, when
the education committee of medical deans was having
difficulty with approving one of my course programmes.
They were specifically challenging the inclusion of
workshops by Frank Lake on birth re-enactment. When
I pointed out that Frank was not only a fully qualified
psychiatrist, but a devout Christian whose workshops
were included in training programmes for the clergy
approved by the bishops of the Church of England, the
opposition melted rapidly away.
3. Appeal to the publicly stated values of your
institution in order to launch radical practices within it.
If an educational institution claims to support the values
of initiative and discretionary judgment, you point out
that a basic way of doing so is progressively to introduce
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Strategies of Soft Revolution
There are some simple strategies for introducing change
in rigid institutions by those who are working members
of them. They may also be used judiciously by external
change agents under contract to introduce change into
such institutions.

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stay there for at least three years. This changed to five
years; and it was in fact nine years before I left in 1985.
After a period of rest, reflection, travel, writing and four
years off from any kind of group facilitation (with the
exception of a TV programme), I re-entered the world of
alternative education and research centres, setting up the
International Centre for Co-operative Inquiry in Italy, 1990
to 2000, and the South Pacific Centre for Human Inquiry
in New Zealand, 2000 to the present time (2012). But
these are stories for another time.
significant degrees of student participation in major aspects of educational decision-making by staff.

4. Launch innovations in the open spaces between the rigid grid-lines of the closed system of your institution. In the job-description contract I wrote in response to being invited to be an Assistant Director of the BPMF, the grid-lines of the BPMF were only visible enough to evoke the spaces between them, spaces within which diverse creative initiatives could be taken.

Comradeship

The overriding sense I have of my engagement with HP throughout the 1970s, and into the early 1980s, is the vigour, excitement and daring of those years, and above all the co-creative comradeship of noble friends equally committed to, and delighting in, the emergence of human flourishing through the process of lived and shared inquiry.

Today, some decades later, at the age of 84, I am a member of an ongoing inquiry group exploring human spirituality, and have participated in our meetings every fortnight for many years. Our current action-inquiry between meetings is focused on what constitutes practical wisdom in everyday behaviour, and what are its distinguishing characteristics. Once again it is comradeship, friendship, the ever-deepening passion of mutual co-creative inquiry – and its transformative impact on action in the wider world – that really matters.

John Heron

References