WYRD AND NOT SO WYRD: HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY AT SUSSEX

by

Peter B. Smith and Brian Bates

'Oh, all right! So long as there's none of that **touching** and **feeling** stuff!'

With these immortal words the then Professor of Developmental Psychology at Sussex finally agreed to Brian Bates' 1973 proposal to start a course in Humanistic Psychology. An earlier proposal had been rejected on the grounds that 'humanistic' was not 'psychology', but the students organised a petition and the Department relented. And the course has survived, and flourished, in large measure because of a continuing high level of student interest and commitment to it.

In fact the seeds of Humanistic Psychology at Sussex had been sown a couple of years earlier, when Peter Smith initiated Personal Growth workshops, open to all members of the University, and these too have survived and flourished.

Other Incarnations of humanistic psychology have had a more 'mixed' fate, though perhaps only one failed to take root altogether, and was discontinued. We outline briefly below the nature and fortunes of the projects we have initiated in this field at Sussex, and where they stand now.

There are a good many reasons for thinking that the University of Sussex provides a setting in which humanistic psychology ought to find a warm welcome. The first of the 'new' universities, it was opened in 1951 with a good deal of publicity about breaking out from outdated teaching methods, rethinking the purpose of education, the value of small group experience and so forth. In due course a more than averagely radical student body was attracted by some of these sixties-style aspirations. Twenty-five years on a more sober mood prevails, but one which does nonetheless leave intact some of the gains notched up during the early years. Teaching in small groups continues to be a required part of all courses in the Arts half of the University. Student culture still expects that tutors will be readily available for consultation. Student occupations have continued to occur at some point in every academic year since 1968 bar one. But in other ways the radicalism of Sussex is skin deep. As a University we have pursued policies which seem intended to ensure that we are seen as both respectable and radical. In recent years our examination systems have moved back toward greater conventionality, sizes of tutorials have crept up and freedom

to choose what courses one takes has been increasingly restricted.

Ironically, one of the University campuses in California which has most fully explored the uses of experiential forms of humanistic teaching (the University of California campus at Santa Cruz) was explicitly modelled on Sussex. At Santa Cruz they took more seriously what some of us here said we wanted to do. Sadly, even there, traditional approaches have been on the increase once more (Kahn, 1981).

In the space available here we would like to describe five attempts to provide learning opportunities related to humanistic psychology here at Sussex, four of which can be thought of as to some degree successful. Four of them would be regarded as 'teaching' by the University whereas the fifth is thought of as 'counselling'. The blurriness as to what is and what is not thought of as legitimate teaching is something which we have needed to clarify in order to know how to proceed. Our view is that any education which calls itself humanistic must be conducted on the basis of an agreed contract between those who take part. Most university education proceeds on the basis of an implicit contract that the student expects to be lectured to, to write essays, to get feedback from tutors and to be examined in some way. Many humanistic approaches seek to broaden or renegotiate this contract. Where this is done it needs to be done bilaterally rather than to be imposed by the tutor if it is not to violate the very values a humanistic tutor holds dear.

For this reason, the first overt utilisation of humanistic psychology at Sussex took place outside of the traditional teaching-learning format. In 1971 a series of 'Personal Growth workshops' was initiated by Peter Smith, which were open free of charge to all members of the University, whether students or otherwise. The workshops were staffed by facilitators from within the University who had relevant skills. In the early days, groups were run on several different bases, including once-weekly, three days intensively, and three days non-residentially. This series continues to the present day, but has now settled down to a pattern of a three-day non-residential group during the final week of each term. This timing is preferred because people are much more likely to be able to attend without interruption at such times. There have now been over 40 such end-of-term groups. In 1977 the organisation of them passed to the University's newly established Counselling Service and a small budget became available to pay group leaders from outside the university when this was necessary. In the early days there were usually enough participants to run several groups concurrently, but this is no longer so.

Although this series of workshops has proved very valuable and has been attended by hundreds of Sussex students, running workshops as an 'extra' doesnot address the main issue: how to develop ways of teaching and learning about humanistic issues in a university setting. In order to make sense of what follows, we need to say that the standard pattern of coursework at Sussex is that most courses last

only one term, and that students ordinarily take only two courses in any term. In other words our system provides a setting where students work intensively at just two subject areas at any one time, but they do so for no more than ten weeks.

In 1973 an optional third-year course overtly titled as 'Humanistic Psychology' was created, initially drawing heavily upon Brian Bates' earlier experiences at the University of California, Berkeley. The course was open to final year students majoring in psychology, and a few others whose major was human sciences. Psychology is a very popular major at Sussex, attracting around 90 students per year. Various complex rules make it easier for some of those students to opt for Humanistic Psychology than it is for others. Nonetheless the Humanistic Psychology option has consistently attracted more takers than any of the other options available, usually numbering 30-40 per year. Our thinking about the nature of the contract between ourselves and a student who elects to take humanistic psychology has varied somewhat over the years. Because students take the course late in their academic career their expectations about how the course will be taught are likely to be rooted in how they have earlier been taught other subjects by other tutors. On the other hand many of the students who opt for the course turn out to be those who have been most alienated by the impersonality of much of academic psychology. Our approach initially is to meet the more orthodox expectations of students entering the course i.e. to provide a reading list and to structure a series of tutorials and seminars which will be based on discussion of what people have read about various aspects of humanistic psychology. However we aim to do this in a manner which provokes a progressive renegotiation of such a conventional format.

We argue that Humanistic Psychology does not comprise a discrete body of knowledge which can form the basis for a fixed syllabus. Its essence lies in its respect for persons and all aspects of their experience. We therefore provide a very long reading list, and ask each student to select two areas from it and present these to a tutorial group during the term. Although the reading list is long, we suggest that each person follows the direction of their interest and treat the list as only a starting point. The 'syllabus' is thus self-defined. The reading list has tended to evolve over the years in relation to topics that are recurringly popular. The current reading list contains 17 major headings, though many of these are subdivided further. These are: The methodology of humanistic psychology; Humanistic personality theories (6 sub-headings, including Jung); Neo-Freudian personality theories; Perspectives on madness; New Therapies (9 sub-headings); Encounter; Hypnosis; Dreams; Hallucinogenic Drugs; Parapsychology; Meditation; Ways of Eastern liberation; Castaneda; Theories of Living and Dying; Self-help groups. The topics selected by students for coverage may be somewhat influenced by the interests of the three of us who have taught the course (Bates, 1983; Catley, 1984; Smith, 1980), but the range selected

is usually something that broadens our own knowledge, rather than drawing too much upon it.

Assessment of coursework for finals is on the basis of a 4000 word essay, on a topic chosen by the student. It accounts for approximately 10% of the student's degree result. It is a rather regular consequence of students' reading in these areas that they say that they wish to undertake some form of experiential learning relating to themselves. When this occurs, we have provided one or several 1-day workshops as a voluntary addition to the course. If people want something more extensive, they are encouraged to attend a Personal Growth workshop or pointed toward other locally available opportunities. Many of the students who take this course are gratifyingly enthusiastic about it. It is not unusual for them to say that the course provided the one opportunity that made doing their whole degree course worthwhile. Most of them take it at a time when there are numerous other pressures on them to complete other assessment essays; nonetheless quite a bit of reading gets done, despite the conflicting pressures. To readers of Self and Society the course may sound as staid and as impersonal as any other form of academic teaching, but it has some old-fashioned virtues: it maximises student choice, it lets the students do most of the teaching, and its relatively conventional structure has protected it against the occasional wishes of colleagues jealous of its success, who might like it discontinued.

Creating an explicitly-labelled course in humanistic psychology has been a high priority for us both. We turn next to some attempts we have made to use humanistic approaches in other aspects of our teaching. First, an instance of a failure. In 1973 Peter Smith became enthused by the chapter concerning university teaching in Carl Rogers' **Freedom to Learn.** Accordingly we reorganised the teaching of a psychology major course which students were required to take, entitled 'Interpersonal Behaviour', along the lines Rogers advocates. This entailed requiring each student at the beginning of term to produce a written statement of their goals in taking the course and how they proposed to achieve them. A reading list was issued, but no formal teaching was scheduled. The tutor held himself available for students to book time with him either individually or in groups, for purposes to be specified by them. They were required to produce a summary of what they had learned by the end of term. The particular year group of students taking this course were somewhat disaffected before this specific course began. They passively accepted the new structure when it was proposed to them, and it gradually became clear as the term passed that they were making little use of the 'freedom to learn' provided by the structure. Mostly they used it to work harder at the other course which they were taking concurrently, upon which more traditionally oriented tutors were pressing them to submit specified essays by fixed deadlines. This experiment was a clear failure and was not repeated. Success in

using such a structure probably requires an option rather than a required course, and no strong competition from other more conventionally taught courses.

Next, a successful, but short-lived project in which an existing, conventional university course was re-vamped along humanistic lines. A feature of Sussex undergraduate education is that approximately half of the student's time is spent on 'contextuals'; courses which, in and of themselves attempt to transcend discipline boundaries. Brian Bates was appointed to the University specifically to develop such courses. One approach he took was to design courses around a series of workshops in which approximately 15 students would meet for one entire day each week, in a large room equipped with musical and art materials, and other ingredients necessary for an orgy of experiential learning. Each workshop was based around one book, read by all the students. It would be discussed, analyzed, picked apart as in the usual analytic approach adopted (uncritically) by higher education. Then the same material would be engaged experientially, through improvisational acting, dance, meditation, painting, music (using mostly percussion instruments), projects in field settings (to the beach before dawn, in a university mini-bus, to greet the rising sun in connection with a study of Joseph Campbell on mythology).

The course was a roaring success in terms of student excitement, commitment, and their stated educational benefits. Enrolment was overwhelming, and numbers had to be strictly controlled. But it had a short life. Two factors led to its discontinuation after three years. First, such a heavily experiential course resulted in student material which could not be 'marked' in conventional fashion: paintings, pieces of taped music, dance performances, multi-media presentations, short stories and poetry, and so on. Since the staple diet of University examinations is 'marks', the course could not develop further within the academic framework. Secondly, Bates experienced 'burnout'. The course took so much time and energy that three years proved to be enough. But perhaps that is acceptable. Longevity is not necessarily the most important criterion of success.

By contrast, we now mention a setting within which it can be more clearly argued that humanistically-oriented experiential work does have a continuing place in an academic course. Since the early seventies an annual four-day experiential workshop has been held residentially for postgraduates at Sussex. It runs on encounter group lines. Although open to any postgraduates, in practice those coming have almost all been students of social work or psychology. Attendance is voluntary. For the same period of time, Peter Smith has been running a one-term course on groupwork for these same social work students. Initially this was run as an extension of the earlier experiential groupwork. Gradual clarification of the what the course is and is not attempting has led to the point where the course now has two elements. One of these is an orthodox seminar to do with theories of groupwork and methods of intervention in groups. The other is experiential, and mostly uses role-

playing to portray situations likely to arise in doing groupwork with social work clients. Students may take either or both of these elements: most choose both.

Finally, postgraduate research should be mentioned. At Sussex students do research for doctorates in psychology initially under the supervision of a small committee of faculty members, and later under the close guidance of a single supervisor. These are then assessed by an 'internal' examiner (someone other than the supervisor) and an 'external' (a psychologist from another University). Students may also finish early with an M.A. or M.Phil.

Both of us have supervised a number of graduate theses on humanistic topics, or which approached more conventional topics from a humanistic perspective. Brian Bates, has supervised projects at the M.A. level which include: The concept of self in Eastern and Western psychology; art therapy and shamanism; metaphorical descriptions of schizophrenia; psychological bases of homeopathy; and so on.

At the doctoral level things become more difficult. The usual requirement of an ongoing empirical research component in the thesis often proves challenging for humanistic topics. Humanistic approaches to research sometimes run the risk of producing results which are highly satisfying to the student and supervisor but insufficiently 'empirical' for the awarding of a doctoral degree. One recently successful D. Phil thesis jointly supervised by Keith Oatley and Brian Bates, was Beverly Moss' work on the use of guided imagery in psychotherapy. Others, supervised by Peter Smith, have been concerned with therapeutic communities and with the outcome of encounter groups. The development of doctoral research projects for humanistically oriented students seems to us important, but is perhaps the area where 'mainstream' assumptions about the nature of psychology clash most drastically with emerging humanistic paradigms.

There has for some time been a wider debate in psychology about how psychology should be done, rather than how it should be taught. Such debate finds a place in many psychology courses at Sussex, not just those taught by us. Our role in that debate is less readily described, but certainly included ensuring that humanistic views are not overlooked when such issues are aired. This is accomplished both through the construction of reading lists and through ensuring that the library stocks relevant books and journals. We hope this brief review gives a feel for the range of humanistic interests which we have been developing. The accomplishments are more modest than we might at one time have hoped for, but they nonetheless feel solid and rooted in what we as persons are able to offer.

For References see page 275

Humanistic Psychologist: Let's take a long shot. (Pauses, student seems keen). Try being a wolf, and show, without words how you feel about each person in this room.

Doctor of Humanities: Last week it was a bookworm

Physicist: A creepy crawly.

Doctor of Humanities: I don't mind the touching and feeling bit. It's when they cathart I can't stand it.

Humanist: I see so much distress, so much bottled up anger. (Raising his voice) I sugest you get in touch with your bloody feelings and (bellows) express them.

God: (entering in the person of a Professor of Psychiatry). Time for mogadons, care of the new community wing.

Philosopher: . . . and washed down with Chateau Lynch la Roche purveyors of elixir by appointment, benefactors who in their munificence . . .

The clock tower belts out the hourly chime. Everyone walks to the door, surreptitiously dropping their mogadons in an ashtray. With a sigh they pick up their pay cheques and walk home contented for an hour or so before the lonely anguish sets in.

References: Smith and Bates

Bates, B. **The Way of Wyrd: tales of an Anglo-Saxon sorcerer.** Century, 1983.

Kahn, M. The Kresge experiment. **Journal of Humanistic Psychology.** 1981,21, 63-70. Also: The seminar: an experiment in humanistic education. Same journal issue, 119-128.

Oatley, K. **Selves in Relation: an Introduction to Psychotherapy and Groups.** Methuen, 1984.

Rogers, C.R. **Freedom to Learn.** Merrill, 1969.

Smith, P.B. **Group processes and Personal Change.** Harper, Row, 1980.
