

LEARNING HOW TO LEARN: AN OPERATIONAL DEFINITION
OF THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

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*(A paper read at the Constructive Teaching Centre,
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I do not often have the opportunity to talk about the Alexander Technique to an audience that already knows what it is and does not have to be convinced of its importance. Usually the people I talk to have never heard of the technique or, if they have heard of it, have confused it with something else. The second group is becoming more common.

In the United States there has been a great proliferation of mind-body techniques and therapies. Some profess to heal the body by way of the mind, others the mind by way of the body.

There are spiritual disciplines, exercise programs, relaxation techniques. Some use massage (in all its varieties), some use hypnosis and autohypnosis. Some heighten your body-awareness by getting you to concentrate on specific areas of tension. Some use breathing exercises; some use group experiences to release emotional blocks, by chanting, by touching, by giving your first impressions of the others in the group. There are also techniques for stimulating the imagination by acting out your daydreams and fantasies. One hundred and five of these techniques are listed by Severin Peterson in his book *Ways People Grow*. They are listed alphabetically from Aikido to Zen. All of these methods claim to make you more of a "whole person" and add to your physical and emotional health. Most of them are organized as separate disciplines, each somewhat defensive towards the others. Recently, however, there has been a trend toward eclecticism, and therapists are appearing who encourage their patients to combine several of these methods in a kind of package deal. Sometimes the Alexander Technique is part of the package. It is listed second by Peterson right after Aikido.

I suppose one should feel grateful at being invited into the therapeutic club.

The invitation presents new problems, however. In my opinion Alexander did not discover just another way to achieve individual salvation. His technique (or principle) is on a different level or order of significance from the other "ways to grow," which are all, as far as I have been able to determine, simply variations on an old theme. Alexander's discovery (as Dewey pointed out) is comparable to the

discoveries that were made in the Renaissance and that caused men to change their ideas of external nature. When you look through a microscope or a telescope the first time you are forced, if you accept the evidence of your senses, to revise your views of the universe outside yourself. Alexander discovered a way of using his hands to give a person new experiences which force him to revise his ideas both of himself and of the universe. Of course a person can reject the experience just as the Professor of Philosophy at Padua rejected Galileo's hypothesis by refusing to look through the telescope. The important thing is that the experience is now available, thanks to F.M.'s discovery. (Here let me say that I do not mean the discovery he made with the mirror. Others may have done the same thing. I mean the discovery that he could communicate his new experiences to others by using his hands.) The discovery has profound implications. If the new knowledge were properly formulated, I believe that it would do for the field of Psychology what Newton did for Physics, transform it into a unified science. No Newton has come along as yet. In the meantime, I feel that the rest of us are under an obligation to keep the incipient science alive and not allow it to be swallowed up by other means and ends before its true potential has been realized and its unique value as an educational discipline established.

With this aim in mind, I should like to sketch for your consideration some of the aspects of the Alexander Technique which in my opinion make it different from anything else.

First I'd like to say that there are two effects of the Technique which should not be used as criteria, impressive though they are. One is improvement in health and the other is improvement in posture.

Most pupils when they start having lessons are struck by the improvement in their health and refer to this improvement when they try to describe the Technique to their friends. I have heard Alexander pupils say that the Technique saved their vision, or saved their career, saved their reason, or saved their life. No doubt it did. Unfortunately, similar claims have been made for almost anything you can think of. It is always difficult to prove that your results followed directly from the means employed and could not have come about in any other way. I reluctantly came to this conclusion a long time ago when I got two badly crippled children to walk — (this was in a hospital and the process was observed by four doctors and several nurses). Everyone was pleased with the results. They explained them however by saying that I had used suggestion to restore the children's confidence in themselves. The children were then turned over to physiotherapists to continue the good work.

Case histories are important and do throw light on the mechanisms involved in the Technique. But they confuse by overstressing the medical aspect. The Technique can profitably be taught to anybody; it is not restricted in its application to people with disabilities. When I began teaching, all of my pupils had serious health problems, and lessons made them feel better. When I went to Tufts, I was afraid it would be difficult working with students who had no serious health problems. This did not prove to be the case, and I was forced to revise my ideas and methods of teaching since I found that 'normal' subjects demanded a different approach.

Posture is another criterion which seems promising at first but must, I believe, be rejected (if by posture you mean the three dimensional arrangement of the parts of the body which can be recorded by instantaneous photography). Everyone has an idea of what "bad" posture is (though "good" posture is more difficult to define). After lessons in the Alexander Technique bad posture usually improves in a striking way, and it may be useful to take photographs before and after a course of lessons to demonstrate the improvement. Unfortunately again, practitioners of other methods produce similar before-and-after photographs, and it would be difficult to prove from the photographs alone that their results are inferior to those achieved by the Alexander Technique. I once showed some of these still photographs to a doctor at Harvard and he assured me that in the Physical Education Department they made these changes all the time.

If you cannot use posture as a criterion, then what can you use? I believe that the distinguishing criterion should be the movement pattern itself. As I understand it, the Alexander Technique is not concerned with three dimensional but with four dimensional posture, in other words with movement. A. R. Alexander refused to judge a person's posture as good or bad until he had seen him move or until he had put his hands on him. I have seen the magnificent posture disintegrate in an instant. Athletes and dancers can go into a postural collapse when they are through performing. On the other hand, I have seen people with atrocious posture who move quite easily, and as they moved their posture improved. An American college professor who was a pupil of the Alexanders during the war had a posture that could not be changed. He was an arthritic; his spinal column was ankylosed and his head fixed in position. As you can imagine, he was a difficult pupil, but the Alexanders (the two of them worked with him together) succeeded in teaching him, and he profited tremendously from the technique. Still photographs, however, would not have recorded the change.

Movement photographs are different. With either motion-picture or multiple-strobe photography you can obtain a record of the trajectory (or pathway) followed by the head during a movement. By measuring the area underneath this trajectory you obtain an index of the efficiency of the movement from the Alexander point of view, since the area increases when the neck and back are allowed to lengthen. The increase in "working height" or "moving height," unlike the static height of a postural photograph, cannot, I feel sure, be faked or obtained by non-Alexandrian methods of exercise or relaxation. Combined with the subjective report of a reduction in the effort expended to move, it gives an index of efficiency which, to my knowledge, nothing but the Alexander Technique can produce. The index can be applied to a great many everyday movements - sitting-to-standing, walking, stairclimbing, picking up objects and the like. I have not tried to record skilled movements like those of a dancer but I am sure the same index can be used with them.

(I should say here that I do not use photographs of this kind in my teaching but have found them invaluable for scientific purposes.)

Believing that the significant aspect of the technique is not posture but movement, I do not like to make a pupil self-conscious about postural faults. In my observation this promotes anxiety - - what the Alexanders called "trying to be right" - - and interferes with the learning process. Using the Alexander principle you can get the pupil to move in a non-habitual and easier way. As he does so his posture will change and many specific faults will be reduced. This experience should register kinesthetically to the pupil as pleasanter, more efficient, and more desirable than his habitual way of moving. It should in Skinnerian terminology be reinforcing. It can give the pupil a new insight into his own use and functioning without having his postural faults pointed out to him.

I have had interesting accounts of such experiences from some of the students at Tufts who studied the technique for various reasons. Two of them were athletes, one a hammer thrower and the other a distance runner. The hammer thrower kept a journal of his experiences, starting with his first lesson. He made a number of interesting observations, the most interesting having to do with his specialty. He knew that he was doing something with his shoulder that interfered with his throw; the coach had pointed it out to him; and he had seen himself doing it on a television play-back; but he could not make a change during his performance. With lessons he found that he could perceive kinesthetically what he was doing wrong and inhibit it; and he was able in this way to add 6 feet to his maximum throw. This happened quite early in lessons. The journal entries from this point

on increase in interest as he notes his tendency to turn his knowledge "into a doing" (as the Alexanders used to say) and as he realizes that the technique, if it is going to give him full value, has to be applied to everything, not just to athletic performance.

The other athlete was not so highly motivated. He was the champion runner at the school and had no particular interest in improving his performance. He noticed, however, that he was getting less and less satisfaction out of running and found himself increasingly fatigued at the end of a race. He had only a few lessons and apparently got what he wanted from them. His report is also interesting. He told me that after a lesson, he had run in an important race. As long as he was unsure of winning, he was unable to release the excess tension in his neck, though he was sharply aware of it. As soon, however, as he was comfortably ahead of his rivals he found that he could stop what he was doing with his neck and finished the race exhilarated rather than exhausted.

This was the first time I had ever worked with athletes, but from these two experiences I would conclude that track performance is a natural field for demonstrating the Alexander principle, since the results can be so readily quantified. It is subjective reports, however, rather than the end results that throw the most light on the principle. What distinguishes the Alexander Technique from all other methods of self-improvement that I know anything about is the character of the thinking involved. Other people talk about awareness and thinking, but operationally they mean something quite different from the Alexander experience. To me it is an expansion of the field of consciousness (or of "attention" if you object to the term "consciousness") in space and in time so that you are taking in both yourself and your environment, both the present moment and the next. It is a unified field organized around the self as a center. At the beginning it has a very simple system of organization but it always takes in both the self (including the relation of the head to the trunk) and something in the environment. In addition to the head relation you can take in the pressure of your feet against the floor and also the pressure of the floor against your feet; you can take in both your eyes and the object you are looking at; your ears and the sounds you are hearing. You can take in what you are doing now and what you are going to do next, without getting tangled up in the process. The expansion of awareness in time restores free will as a datum of experience.

Such a concept of awareness would, if it were established, force the re-organization of two fields of psychology - - perception, which at present is fractionated, and learning-theory, which seems unable to cope with the problem of free will.

The expanded field of consciousness makes possible what Dewey called "thinking in activity". In my experience the field cannot be maintained for any great span of time (though I have found that the span steadily increases over the years). It fades in and fades out. When it has faded out for any length of time, its absence manifests itself by a sense of nagging discomfort which forces one back to the "means whereby".

I believe that this model can be applied to any situation that involves perception or learning. A good illustration was supplied by another student who was an accomplished jazz musician. His specialty was "miscellaneous percussion"; that is, he had at his disposal a large variety of instruments which could be struck, pounded, shaken, rattled or scraped. Jazz, as he explained it to me, is wholly improvisational. The jazz musician has to be aware of what he is doing, what he is going to do next and what everyone else in the band is doing, without losing feedback from the audience. He must be able, my student wrote, "to conceive and execute his own ideas while keeping the music that is coming at him as a reference. This, he added, is nothing more than maintaining a balance between internal and external environment." "Self-monitoring" is the term he used to describe this ability. If you do not have it instinctively, he said, the Alexander Technique is the only way to get it.

I'd like to read this to you in his own words: "The major problem that one has when starting out on an instrument is the inability to monitor your own performance. Again the invaluable nature of the Alexander Technique as applied to music instruction is apparent. The more one becomes aware of physical counterparts to seemingly unrelated phenomena the more objective one can be in viewing one's own workings, due to the objective sensory distance that prevents one from interfering with the task. A good student even when operating under the auspices of a teacher must always fill in between the teacher's words of wisdom. You cannot *teach* anybody anything; but you can teach them how to learn."

"Learning how to learn" is what distinguishes the Alexander Technique from all the other "ways to grow." Thinking, directing, "giving orders", or however you wish to describe it, is not an end in itself. It has value and meaning only as it is applied to the pupil's own life. As Marjorie Barstow, an American teacher who was in Alexander's first training course, put it: "giving orders is a procedure that turns into activity, not (into) fixtures; - - the teacher is only a guide to help the student learn to think and do for himself; - - it is the teacher's job to help the student carry on into daily activities."