

The F. M. Alexander Memorial Lecture

delivered to ATTSNZ, Friday 7th April 2006

by

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“Evenin’ professor - what you bin up to today then?”
“I’ve been teaching my dog how to whistle - mine’s a pint and the dog’ll have a packet of crisps.”
“On the ’ouse professor - whistling dog’ll entertain the customers.”
“Oh he can’t whistle Jack.....”
“But you said you taught him.....”
“Oh I taught him - but he didn’t learn.....”

HOW DO DOGS LEARN TO WHISTLE?

TEACHING, LEARNING, EDUCATION...AND THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

Just over three years ago I had a vision. I saw a rosy future for the Alexander Technique - the equivalent of a tropical island where everyone goes forward and up and knows what inhibition and direction is. And the passport to that island, for me, was education in the form of a Masters degree, which was suddenly an option for those of us who prowl the shores of professionalisms trying to find our identity and watch the tide for incoming government regulations. Accordingly I dipped my toe in the chilly waters of academia. “Come on in” they said and so I ventured in and found myself awash in a strange sea full of icebergs waiting to chill the heart and sink me, and not much in the way of lifeboats or even wreckage to cling to.

Concepts such as aims and objectives, Learning outcomes, Skills and knowledge, learning theories, reflective practice, transformational learning, taxonomies, assessment criteria and a hundred other issues floated past, all demanding my attention.

“You know how to do research of course.” declared my supervisor.

“Um - I can tell you what the Alexander Technique is if you like - would you care for a demonstration?”

On a personal level, the supervisor was quite interested but on a learning level, I was the learner and she was the teacher and somehow education had to take place!

So I put on my google search mask and went diving into the world-wide-web, not in search of ways to ‘prove’ the Alexander Technique but of parallel processes that could

act as mirrors for the way in which we learn, teach and relearn the Alexander Technique; particularly how we acquire the skills to teach it to others.

Learning methods

My supervisor constantly informed me that the Alexander Technique was not a ‘proven’ learning method and that I had to verify any statement I made. When you deal with an individual, you, as an Alexander Teacher can give them a demonstration of what is involved in learning and their role in it, but you can’t get your hands on a University or a department and free its neck (or wring it, when you feel frustrated!) so you must find another way. Alexander, in writing four books, and the connections he made with people such as Dewey during his lifetime offers a great deal from which one can work. My basic stance, in revealing what an Alexander teacher needs to learn, is that we are the ultimate in reflective practitioners. Reflective practise has many definitions but the basic tenet of being conscious enough to adapt teaching to circumstance is where I pitch my tent.

Looking at other documented learning methods and their evolution towards reflective practice brings the work of Schön (1987a) into focus. Schön draws on an educational developmental history that runs back over centuries to Plato, progresses through Tolstoy, and his approach to teaching Russian peasants to read, and Dewey’s concepts of thinking in activity, engaging a learners’ consciousness, and onwards to his observations about reflective practice and its place not just in learning, but in that most tricky of learning situations where teachers are learning how to teach.

In discoursing on reflection in action Schön observes that when students are learning an artistry, their experience is that they must plunge into the doing of it and try and educate themselves before they know what it is they are learning. They feel that their tutors can’t really tell them what they are learning, but in order to learn, the students have to plunge into ‘unknowing’, which may make them feel vulnerable, incompetent, out of control, or that they don’t know what they are doing. Schön observes that further down the learning track, students do understand their tutors or coaches and can engage in dialogue that is meaningful. How does this happen? Schön describes the process:

...the coach’s demonstrations [of the art] and the students’ performances are messages which they send to one another. The student’s performance, ... telling the coach, "... This thing that I’m doing now is what I make of what you have said." And the coach, observing that and seeing the problems, the difficulties that the student has. At its best this dialogue between coach and student becomes a dialogue of reciprocal reflection-in-action where each of them is reflecting on, and

responding to, the message received from the other.

Schön's description of the subtle interweaving of cues and dialogue between coach and student throws up interesting questions for the Alexander World in the emphasis that it places on the coach's skill to assess and reassess almost continuously where an individual student is comprehending and how to teach them. This implies an ability on the part of the coach to hold in mind the skills that are being aimed at, to see the pathway the student needs to follow, and also to recognise where the student might be on that pathway, or if in fact they have wandered off on to a completely different pathway. A coach then needs to offer the student signposts and indications to re-orientate them, whilst having the skill to recognise when a variation on the art of the skill that is being taught is fruitful, and when it is not.

Learning to teach the AT doesn't break down in quite the same way as learning to design a building or to play a musical instrument or create an art work, but in terms of how the skills are communicated from trainer (coach) to trainee (student) a reflective, learning-by-doing approach has a lot to recommend it. The AT is a perceptual skill that is concerned with recognising a response in a person, and this is done largely through the sense of touch. The knowledge that is imparted is not done so on a step-by-step basis.

A person seeking Alexander lessons for a breathing difficulty needs to 'know' the role the neck and head play in breathing. But they may think they need to know directly about breathing and not be interested in the neck and head because they don't 'know' about it. The 'knowing' they need to acquire is a 'knowing' of the body, an experience of difference, a revelation of unrecognised tension patterns. A trainee learning to teach such a future client has to comprehend many different layers of 'knowing' and what they mean and imply if they are to succeed in offering such a client a new view of their problem.



One difficulty with training Alexander teachers is that it isn't like teaching French, or music. There is no obvious start point and no obvious path to follow. The external structure of a lesson is not hard to grasp. A teacher may work with a pupil in standing, sitting, walking or other movements. A teacher will most likely put a pupil on their teaching table, and may then proceed to take the pupils' head in their hands. They may lift limbs and gently

encourage the release of holding patterns the pupil didn't know about. Whilst doing these things, the teacher will be encouraging the pupil to think about themselves and their body in a new way and to become aware of their own habit patterns in relation to movement and rest. It is subtle and powerful work. At first it is not easy to understand why such apparently simple activities can have such a beneficial effect, but gradually a pupil realises that it isn't so simple after all, and what they thought was just about movement or relaxation is actually more complex, and is about reactions, both mental and physical and that what they are really learning is different ways of responding to the stimuli of life. Equipping a trainee with these kinds of teaching skills requires a variety and depth of approaches that, once the trainee has grasped, acts as a vocabulary on which they can then build.

Kolb's research, reviewed by Brooks (1995) describes four modes of experiential learning and acknowledges the role of an individual's preferred style of learning. These four modes are seen as identifiably separate, but interweaving with each other. Kolb suggests that individuals may have a preferred learning mode that dominates their learning cycle. Relating these four modes to how Alexander Trainees study and learn is interesting. The modes reinforce each other and where a student appears to have a strong preference, the cycle encourages them to engage in a more rounded learning environment. In this way students who are naturally theorists are encouraged to align theory with experience and students that immerse themselves in sensation are encouraged to think, reason and reflect.

Kolb's modes of learning:

Parallels with AT training

Through concrete experience

(i.e. doing it, being part of it) Trainees regularly receive concrete experience through individual hands-on work from teachers as part of their training. This is a very valuable part of training.

Through observation and reflection

(i.e. watching, cogitating on experiences both seen and felt) When trainees take part in 'hands-on-groups' where they learn those skills for themselves, they experience three different roles in one session.

Undertaking the procedure themselves.

Observing another student undertaking the same procedure.

Being on the receiving end of the procedure.

These three positions allow for observation and reflection from different perspectives.

Through abstract conceptualisation

(i.e. thinking, planning, constructing thoughts and observations, drawing these elements together)

The study of the Alexander Technique theory is undertaken throughout the three years of training in the form of lectures, small group study of theoretical concepts and one to one tutorials. Relating it to actual experience is crucial.

Through active experimentation

(i.e. doing with a 'try it out' attitude) Regular active experimentation is a strong part of the training process. Students watch a demonstration of a procedure and then experiment with that procedure with supervision from a teacher. They then go on to further experiment without supervision.

Other learning theories

Other learning theories that offer a relevant highlight for AT training are **Sensory Stimulation Theory and Holistic Learning Theory**. Laird (1985), commenting on Sensory Stimulation Theory notes the involvement of the senses in learning. The basis of this is that learning is enhanced when the senses are stimulated. Laird noted that in adults much of their knowledge (75%) is learned through seeing. Hearing is thought to be next most effective (approx 13%) and the other senses-touch, smell and taste-accounting for 12% of what we know. Senses are stimulated through a variety of colours and facts presented visually.

This places a huge emphasis on the visual sense and very little on the sense of touch and makes no mention of proprioception either faulty or accurate. This emphasis on visual learning is more appropriate to a fact-based knowledge, such as a language or science. In a competency based knowledge, such as AT training, the main sense that is used is the sense of touch and proprioception. The senses interlink with each other and understanding the importance of visual stimuli could further enhance the learning-by-psychophysical experience. In a small group situation, a student watching a procedure 'reads' that procedure via their own memory and experience as well as by what they see 'now'.

Laird also outlines a Holistic learning theory that acknowledges the individual as not just a 'learner' but as a complex being made up of intellect, emotion, body impulses, intuition and imagination, all aspects requiring activation if learning is to be effective. The relevance of this observation can be observed when people are learning physical skills that have other components (as do all skills) such as a spiritual dimension or a meditative dimension, which implies an emotional attitude. Many such 'physical' skills are learnt in an imitative manner, yoga and t'ai chi ch'uan for example taught by demonstration from the master with the pupil then attempting to copy not only the masters' movement or posture, but the attitude and manner in which he or she performs the movements. Such learning is filtered through the individual's senses and is interpreted by them according to those senses.

These theories all offer something to the AT world. The following diagram positions these in relation to each other and the Alexander Technique.

The Sanctuary of the past

The past is a country that inhabits our present and our future. We learn things and absorb experiences through our senses, which are largely shaped by our past

experience. Many people seek to break the mould of their past, either to deal with it or to escape from it. Our ability to learn and even our desire to learn, has to acknowledge this backdrop, because it is the sheet on which we write our 'new' experience. We do not possess a blank sheet that offers us a completely different world-view from that previously held. The past may be our prison, but it is also our sanctuary, it is a known country, however unwanted.

As human beings, we seek order and are comforted by an understanding of events. We delve into situations, both internal and external, seeking explanations and frameworks of reference on which to pin our experiences. This need to render order from chaos is so powerful that we will often tell ourselves that something was 'meant to be' or more probably, 'not meant to be' as a way of placing events. This is much more comforting (for most people) than the idea that life is unfair, random and chaotic.

Yet if we are to learn we must seek to be mindful of the unknown and allow ourselves occasionally to 'leap into the unknown'.

Models for learning

Exploring methods of learning and of incorporating learning into practice, I came across models expressed in a circular fashion. Higgs & Titchen (2001) developed a model for the creative and critical becoming of individuals, organisations and professions. The model consists of four circles weaving together, each circle representing an aspect of experience, being and learning. The four aspects are also likened to the cycle of the seasons, spring, summer, autumn and winter. At the centre of the model is a representation of a Celtic knot, used as metaphor symbolising the act of becoming. In the centre of the knot is a chrysalis, an area of creative change that is hard to define, being essentially a processing chamber where knowledge and experience are broken down and reformed in a similar way to a caterpillar breaking down its own body in order to re-build itself and re-emerge as a transformed being. This centre point is described as a dark place, an abyss.

a fertile void ...into which we must leap
if we are to engage in...becoming and
the light ...or new life and direction.
(Higgs & Titchen, 2001 p.277)

The identification of the centre of the model as an abyss, a void, an uncertainty is echoed by Alexander's (2000, p.34) observation that *you can't do something you don't know, if you keep on doing what you do know*. In identifying faulty sensory awareness, and developing the concepts of approaching a task with a means orientation and not an end orientation, and developing the skills of inhibition and direction, Alexander (1932) offers us tools that enable us to immerse ourselves in the void and to remain at the creative centre of knowing, doing, being and becoming.

Reflective practice

Highly skilled and experienced AT teachers exhibit a shift in awareness whereby they are able to multi-task at a very high level. These tasks for an Alexander teacher include the appropriate use of the hands, which is an outcome of their own Use. An example of this skill would be a teacher allowing their hands to find their own way to work on a pupil and putting the hands in places that they seem not to have 'decided' on. In this case a pupil will often comment on the appropriateness of the contact in terms of that is the seat of their discomfort or that contact stimulates release in their whole body, or frees their breathing. A pupil may then ask how the teacher 'knew' where to put their hands. At this level it may appear to an outsider and even to the practitioner that decisions and actions are instinctive, possibly even inspired and intuitive. Claxton (2000) discussing the anatomy of intuition outlines several modes of intuitive practices varying from expert 'know-how' to heightened sensitivity to clues and past experience that a practitioner may use in making apparent intuitive choices. In my experience of learning practising and teaching the AT, these choices come about as the result of inhibition and direction, applied over a long period of time. Concepts of the body learning 'unconscious competence' are a seductive irrelevance in this context. Whilst I have no doubt that an automatic pilot or motor memory may be part of the human psyche, I suspect that the true nature of these conditions is yet to be fully illuminated and are more complex than they appear. There is a lack of substantial literature exploring this area

Anticipated Learning Outcomes and the Learning Journey

When a learning journey is undertaken, it is likely that there is an anticipated outcome. If you simply 'end gain' in respect of that outcome then you are likely to repeat your habitual responses to learning. If, when learning, you can inhibit the desire to achieve an anticipated outcome then it is possible to put aside any anxiety about 'getting it right' and allowed the experience of a new territory, which is likely to be challenging and different to your normal environment. This is an easy attitude to adopt at the beginning of any task, but not an easy attitude to maintain. The decision to withhold consent to the desire to respond in the habitual way is one that has to be frequently remade. This to me is the ultimate prize that the Alexander Technique has to offer the traveller, an action packed journey that can last a lifetime to an unknown land that never fails to intrigue.

**We shall not cease
from exploration
And the end of all our
exploring
Will be to arrive
where we started
And know the place
for the first time.**

T. S. Elliot

That dog

So how do dogs learn to whistle? Simple - they don't, because they don't need to, but a clever dog will soon get you whistling for it.

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Other theories place different emphasis on different senses

Alexander Technique

When sensory awareness is unreliable, habitual response to stimuli blocks the path to learning (new experience) Inhibition & direction offer a new conscious pathway to individual learning

Sensory Stimulation Theory: Sight 75%
Hearing 13%-Touch, smell & taste 12%. Learning enhanced with multi-sense stimulation (**Laird**)

Holistic Learning theory: Intellect, emotions, body impulse (desire) intuition and imagination all require activation (**Laird**)

Experiential Learning: four learning styles including observation and reflection, experimentation and experience (**Kolb**)

Demonstration/ Imitation: learning by being shown a course of action and absorbing and/or imitating it. Involves many senses (**Schön**)