

Development of skill with the hands

History

F.M. Alexander gave very little information about how he arrived at the extraordinary skill with his hands that impressed so many people who had lessons from him. One hint we have is mentioned in Frank Pierce Jones' book *Freedom to Change*, where the author quotes FM as saying that in 1914 he was just beginning to find a new way of using his hands when teaching. "By applying the inhibitory control which had proved so effective in breathing and speaking) to the use of his hands he was learning to make changes in a pupil that were different to manipulation or ordinary postural adjustment."

The other key information he gave us is the statement, often quoted by the first generation of teachers, that the practice of "monkey with the hands on the back of the chair" gives all the experiences you need for using your hands as a teacher.

The first of the above comments, the one about inhibition, suggests that after perhaps beginning in his first years of teaching to simply pull and push his students towards better postural alignment, FM had realized he could apply the indirect process of inhibition and direction to working on his students. In this way during the activity of teaching he would himself be employing the means to improved use he was aiming to convey to his students, thus creating a harmony between his verbal instructions and his manual guidance.

The second comment above, about the practice of monkey with the hands on the back of the chair, shows us more precisely how to achieve this harmony of verbal and manual guidance. This practice is about integrating the action of the limbs with the support musculature of the trunk and neck, so that postural support and breathing are not compromised by limb action. In other words the Primary Control is functioning well so the whole body therefore remains more open and more sensitive.

Monkey gives you the flexible working stance that optimises the tone and efficiency of the postural support musculature. It exemplifies what FM called "antagonistic pulls" (also called "oppositions) in which the major parts of the body, particularly the head, pelvis, and legs, are tending to move away from each other to maintain elastic tone in the musculature linking them.

Hands on the back of the chair gives you the ability to use your hands and arms as extensions of the trunk musculature, using that platform of firm, elastic support as a foundation for sensitive yet active use of the hands to communicate good use to another person. To differentiate this way of using the hands from the hard, tight gripping and grasping we are so accustomed to, Walter Carrington sometimes used to refer to this way of working as "using the hands as feet." As small babies we all used our hands and arms as "feet" for crawling, and something of that direct connection from open hands to the whole body's support system is needed for good quality Alexander teaching.

So during a three year teacher training program there is a slow progression to develop this skill. For the first two years this can seem somewhat artificial and repetitive, but it is the necessary rehearsing of simple elements, with great attention to one's own use in the process, that enables a trainee in the third year to make the vital transition to working fluidly and adding verbal explanations/instructions without losing his/her underlying co-ordination.

Practical Instruction and Coursework

Overview

Throughout the three years of training students will have several times a week a “hands-on group” supervised by one of the senior teachers. If possible this will comprise a group of three students at a similar level of training, i.e. all in the same year and only one or two trimesters apart in that year. The advantage of groups of three is that one student is the “subject” to be practised on; another student is the person practising a hands-on skill; and the third student can put a hand on one of the other two in order to learn by feeling and observing the subtle changes that may be taking place as the supervising teacher guides the thinking (the inhibition and direction) of the trainee practising the skill.ⁱ

Developing skill with the hands is a step-by-step, well worked out progression, somewhat like a musician learning and practising scales and fingering exercises until they become second nature and attention becomes freer to cope with the demands of a teaching situation.

Put simply, you must learn to bring about in yourself that “hands as feet” pattern of use by practising monkey and hands on the back of the chair. Then you must learn to get and maintain that with your hands on another person in a simple situation such as while that person is lying in semi-supine. Then you learn to get and maintain that pattern of use with your hands on another person while they are standing and sitting, and from there to continue that pattern of use while you keep your hands in good contact with the other person as they move. This will occupy much of the hands-on work in the first year of training. The next stage is to maintain that pattern of use throughout yourself while you initiate movement in another person, and later support and control that movement, for example in and out of a chair or the movement of an arm or leg on the table. This will occupy much of the hands-on work in the second year of training.

At every stage the main emphasis is on the trainee teacher's own use: “non-doing” rather than “doing”, in the sense that you are taking care of yourself rather than trying to “fix” your student.. The actions an Alexander teacher performs are relatively simple compared to some more directly manipulative techniques, but it is the quality with which these simple actions are performed that subtly communicates good use to the student.

First and Second Year Coursework and Goals

Much of the first year's hands-on groups will be spent learning to sustain the quality of attention and intention we call directing, and to recognize that thinking really has an influence on muscles. The supervising teacher will be guiding the students with their hands on each other in very simple situations, asking them to project the directive messages to the various parts of the body, and giving them appropriate feedback as that starts to have an effect. In this way first year students are learning to think clearly and reliably for themselves. Some students may be quicker than others at this, but if they trust the thinking (directing) process, their own co-ordination and use will improve and they will gradually develop a more accurate sensory register.

In the second year of training this improved sensory register makes it possible to feel more of what is happening in the student you have your hands on. The groups progress to more demanding variations of chair and table work, but still with the emphasis on maintaining your own use as you practise these variations. Each new step forward will often be followed by a review of previous, simpler procedures, to ensure the foundations are not lost as new elements are added.

Third Year Coursework & Goals

In the final year of training, after so much emphasis on “non-doing”, you begin to appreciate that in this way of working there is no real separation between “doing” and “non-doing”, just as there is no clear separation between doing and feeling. As you use your hands more actively to move, lift and support your student you are discovering how doing can arise from a non-doing foundation, and how this new form of action allows your hands and whole body to remain sensitively open to feel what is happening in your student whether your hands are still or active. In a lesson you are conforming to Prof. Raymond Dart's definition of poise: “when the reflex neuromuscular apparatus of body-balance is integrated with the neuromuscular apparatus of non-reflex, purposeful or intentional movement.” Your intentional (purposeful) movements to use your hands to guide your student to improved use are not interfering with your reflex neuromuscular apparatus of body-balance.

At times you will be quietly communicating the quality of your own neuromuscular system to your student with your hands simply being present, opening onto and into the student as a link between your two nervous systems. At other times you may be more actively moving your student, or offering a little of that physical support that the student's own musculature is not yet able to supply, while still maintaining that link between the two nervous systems. In these situations, to use a vocal analogy, you are whispering hints in your student's ear, not shouting commands across a parade ground. You are delicately employing what Dart beautifully described as “inhibitional and educational manipulations”; helping your student to stop (“inhibitional”) pulling himself down in ways he is barely aware of yet, but he can become more aware of (“educational”) by the contrast between his habitual use and the new use you are facilitating in him.

Concurrently during the third year of training you will be considering what kind of verbal instruction and explanations to give your students. Being faced with an

expectant new student can be stressful, and if you are struggling to think of what to say, attention to your own use may diminish. At moments like that the disciplined work of two years and more practising simple skills while paying attention to yourself will prove to be an invaluable foundation. Similarly, some rehearsing of verbal explanations during the training, before being faced with the reality of a new student, gives you a foundation for communicating verbally, so you are not having to think out every detail as you go along. In this way you can arrive at that harmony between verbal instructions and manual guidance we are seeking.

ⁱ This structured program is based on John Nicholls' eleven years of working as an assistant to Walter and Dilys Carrington, and his subsequently further developing the structured approach during sixteen years of directing teacher training courses in Melbourne, Australia, Brighton, England, and New York, USA.

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