

The Training of Alexander Teachers

A frequently heard joke among students on Alexander teacher training courses goes something like this. Student arrives home looking weary after morning on the training course. Partner asks sympathetically: “You look worn out. What did you do in class today, darling?” Student replies: “Oh, I lay on the floor for a while, then I went in and out of a chair a few times, walked a few steps, lay down again, sat with my hands on the back of another chair, and then put my hands on someone else while they stood up and sat down. I’m absolutely exhausted!” Partner’s sympathy quickly fades.

Indeed, if someone unfamiliar with the process visits an Alexander teacher training class, that is rather how it might look. A group of people repeatedly performing mundane, simple activities with great care and attention. Not exactly a hard day on the factory floor. Yet the tiredness is often real during the first year of the training as these simple procedures put demands on muscle to work in new ways, and the clarity of attention required is almost like building up new “mental” muscle.

F.M. Alexander’s first attempts at training others to teach his work were of an informal apprenticeship nature. His brother A.R. and sister Amy had assisted him in Melbourne, and in London he took on two women, Ethel Webb and Irene Tasker, as assistants in a similar fashion. However in 1931 a more organised training programme began. From the beginning this was a three year programme, with students meeting for several hours, five days a week, during the typical British educational term times. The emphasis was largely on students working to develop their own use to a very high level, as F.M. firmly believed from his own experience of teaching that you must practise what you preach. In the work of kinaesthetic re-education, the good use of the teacher is the paramount factor determining whether his/her hands succeed in conveying to the pupil the sensory experience of the co-ordination required, and only deep personal experience can enable a teacher to give the clear verbal explanations also required.

This basic format of training continued until F.M.’s death in 1955, when the original course was carried on by Walter Carrington. In subsequent years Walter added extra structural elements to the training such as regular study of Alexander’s book and other relevant literature, study of anatomy and physiology, and a more organised approach to the development of the manual skills of Alexander teaching. The majority of the training courses operating today within the different national societies proceed along these lines with their own individual variations.

When someone is having individual lessons in the Alexander Technique, a process of change and improvement takes place by frequent repetition during the lessons of simple activities under the guidance of the teacher. Emphasis is on the quality of attention to the pupil’s use as the activity is performed, so the ends to be gained may seem relatively easy, but the quality of performance is all important, not success. An analogous process takes place in the training of Alexander teachers. The actual manoeuvres an Alexander teacher performs with hands on a pupil look really quite simple. Moving someone in and out of a chair; gently holding and guiding their head, neck, torso and limbs in sitting, standing, and while the pupil lies on a firm couch. Can this really take three years to learn, especially when compared to the apparently complex manual skills of, say, osteopathy or chiropractic? But as with the individual lesson process, the secret lies in the *quality* of performance. Learning to do simple things with a very high degree of co-ordinated use; the teacher’s whole body expressing the light, lively, integrated, elastic muscle tone he or she is aiming to convey to the pupil.

This is not just a matter of being a good visual role model. We have found from many years experience that the “tone” of the experience conveyed by the teacher’s hands is a reflection of the tone of the teacher’s entire body (and therefore the teacher’s entire nervous system and the other

levels of being that may imply). The external simplicity hides a skill that will go on being refined throughout the teacher's working life.

One of F.M. Alexander's most useful discoveries was the practical procedure known as "Hands on the back of the chair." It provides a paradigm for all use of the hands in activity, ensuring the use of the hands is co-ordinated with the primary needs of the trunk for upright support and freedom to breathe. F.M. himself is often quoted by teachers who trained with him as saying this procedure contained all the experiences one needed to use the hands as a teacher of the Technique. The hands on the back of the chair procedure therefore provides the background for all the learning to use one's hands on others in an Alexander teacher training programme. This learning is best done in small groups, usually three students together, being guided through a step-by-step programme over the first two years of the course. In this way, simple practices become the foundation from which more complex skills can develop. It is a steady, well worked-out discipline, like a musician learning scales, which needs to be established before students become able to work more fluidly as they get towards the end of their training.

In most forms of what might be termed "manual therapy," eg physiotherapy, osteopathy, chiropractic, etc., there are two distinct modes of using the hands. There is using the hands to feel, to palpate and discover what the problems are in the patient; then there is using the hands to intervene, to perform some type of manipulative manoeuvre to correct the perceived problem. A distinct feature of good Alexander teaching is that these two modes are unified: that use of the teacher's whole self that makes for greatest sensitivity in the hands to feel what is happening in the pupil is at the same time the key aspect of conveying to the pupil the possibility of change to a better manner of use.

A few years before F.M. Alexander's death discussions began about the formation of a professional society to supervise standards of teaching and teacher training, and in 1958 the Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique (STAT) was formed in the UK with the following aims:

1. To maintain and improve professional standards
2. To make the Technique more widely known
3. To facilitate contact between members
4. To encourage research
5. to prevent abuse and exploitation by untrained people.

At that time, in 1958, three Alexander teacher training courses had been running in Britain. In 1997 in the UK there are fourteen approved by STAT, and courses in at least nine other countries either approved by STAT or by similar professional societies set up more recently in those countries. The Society assesses the suitability of those who wish to run teacher training courses, and lays down minimum requirements in terms of length of training, structure of training and core curriculum. There is also a system of visits by external moderators to try to maintain fairness of qualification standards among courses. Because the nature of the work is so individual, courses are small, ranging from five to forty trainees, and a teacher/student ratio of about 1:5 is recommended. Classes usually take place three to four hours a day, four or, more commonly, five days a week, still following the basic pattern established by FM himself, as that level of consistency and continuity has been found to be most beneficial.

[Published in *The Complete Illustrated Guide to the Alexander Technique*. Element Books 1998.]