

How We Learn the Alexander Technique

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I want to identify an aspect of the process by which the educational content of the Alexander Technique is taken up and applied outside the lesson, where most of the *learning*, as contrasted with the *instruction*, must necessarily take place. I will suggest that this learning occurs largely as a function of an acquired Cognitive-Proprioceptive Model (CPM), potentially one that is progressively more comprehensive and accurate. Perhaps the term cognitive-proprioceptive promptly suggests itself as a sort of pointy-headed version of FMA's psycho-physical, but there is an important distinction: Psycho-physical is of very broad reference, implying, in the vocabulary of psychology, the whole of the affective (emotional), cognitive, and motor domains of human functioning. Cognitive-proprioceptive, on the other hand, is quite specific, referring to thinking in its usual connotation (including imagination and memory), as well as to the neurological sensing of support and movement information from within the body. The latter terminology seems much closer to the actual scope and practice of our work, and therefore more appropriate to the theory of that work, regardless of one's personal view of the Technique relative to the totality of the human condition.

I begin by describing some aspects of a typical Alexander Technique lesson from the viewpoint of an observer without particular foreknowledge,

say from Mars. Two adults are fully clothed, in a room containing a straight chair, a massage-type table, and a mirror. One does most, but not all, of the speaking, and from time to time places hands on the other's body, often in the region of head and neck and also on the torso (but excluding the breasts, to be sure)—this one will be referred to as the “speaker/toucher.” A portion of the observation period, perhaps 15 minutes, is spent with the speaker/toucher apparently and repeatedly assisting the other—the “touchee”—to sit down on and rise from the chair, using both verbal and manual cues and sometimes the mirror in this process. In another phase, the speaker/toucher adjusts the position of the touchee's body while the latter reclines on the table. Some of the words and phrases heard during both phases of the period, which lasts a half hour or more, are “inhibition,” “direction,” “primary control,” “head,” “neck,” “back,” “hip-joints,” and “torso.” Physical or verbal manifestations of affect (pleasure, confusion, etc.) might also be observed. The session comes to a close with the speaker/toucher assisting the touchee to get up from the table, and then to walk about the room. Finally, the speaker/toucher (hereinafter, “teacher”) receives compensation in some form from the touchee (hereinafter, “student”), another meeting-time is arranged, and the student leaves.

I have cast this scenario in such stark terms to highlight how the very rich meaning of the Alexander Technique boils down for the student to certain perceptions, concepts, and affective

responses that occur during the lesson. What the student takes away, however, is not these perceptions and concepts per se, but rather the memory of them. It is through relying upon these memories, always selective and imperfect, that the student inwardly transforms and works with the lesson experience. This inner working-through of received material is essentially a process of modeling, of making one thing represent (“re-present”) in a lesser way something that is greater. In daily life, students hopefully summon this model in times of remembering and awareness, sometimes more and sometimes less explicitly, as a guide for their responses and actions in real time.

What paradoxically characterizes one’s CPM at any given time is, on the one hand, its distinct presence, yet on the other, its indistinct composition. As I said in “Defining Primary Control” (*AmSAT News* No. 64, Summer 2004) and elsewhere, idea and experience ineffably meet and blend in each unique “empersonment” (that’s you, bub) of the Technique. And, as with any model, the quality of the result depends upon the quality of the maker’s motivation, talent, and materials. Motivation and talent belong necessarily to the maker—the student—and will always remain more-or-less given and variable among individuals. Materials, on the other hand, real enough during the lesson, become “virtual” in the form of memories afterwards. This constitutes the central problem for Alexander Technique teachers: providing the materials in such form and content as to be

remembered most accurately (and positively, to be sure) by the student.