

The Alexander Technique in the Choral Classroom

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The Alexander Technique in the Choral Classroom
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Forward

My introduction to the Alexander Technique came when I took part in the VoiceCare Network impact course. The VoiceCare Network courses were designed to provide more thorough training for people whose careers involve vocal training: voice teachers, choir directors, music teachers, drama directors, etc. At the core of the VoiceCare Network lies the Alexander Technique, and we learned a fair amount of “Alexander” as it pertained to the use, and health, of our voices. All of this had a huge impact on me, especially in my teaching and singing. Since then, I have done my best to use the language we learned, I have focused on teaching with a bit more patience and understanding, and I have taken strides to bring this fascinating concept of conscious awareness and body use into all areas of my life. Fascination for the Alexander Technique motivated me to do further research and to choose it as one of the major focuses of my masters degree. One year ago, eight years after my VoiceCare experience, I heard about a course in the Alexander Technique held relatively near my home and taught by internationally known teachers of the Alexander Technique. I immediately enrolled in the course; my experiences are included in this document.

Part one of this document is a portion of literary research explaining the Alexander Technique. Some strategies that stem from the Alexander Technique are included for use in teaching singers. Part two is documentation of my personal experiences in taking the course in the Alexander Technique one year ago. This personal account is included to present the Alexander Technique more fully and to demonstrate my resulting growth in understanding.

At some point, as they are reading about the Alexander Technique, readers may discover that they are moving various joints, or adjusting their posture. These discoveries are common,

intriguing and fun; they are the Alexander Technique in action bringing the readers to a conscious awareness of themselves in their body. Readers are encouraged to notice, and “observe,” these movements because they are what students of the Alexander Technique feel, and “listen to” as they learn. Although this applies to all of us in any profession, musicians, dancers, and actors find this technique very effective in enhancing their practice time and their performance.

Part I

Teaching an individual to sing is a difficult task when one considers all the factors involved. The simple fact that the student cannot hold, or look at, his or her voice is confusing enough without considering the role of the breath, tongue, jaw, vowels, consonants, pitch, rhythm, and fear in the equation. When working with students, we often remind them of these factors and “work hard” at getting our students to free up the jaw, neck, tongue, or breath. We use words like relax, free, and release and students “work hard” to do exactly as we say. “Working hard” to relax is contradictory and therefore, inefficient. Is there a more efficient means to a more efficient end? One possibility is to apply the Alexander Technique. Until recently, teachers of singing at the professional and collegiate levels were familiar with, and utilized, the Alexander Technique. Now, group strategies are being adapted and the Alexander Technique is finding its way into the choral classroom. In order to develop a familiarity with the Alexander Technique and its application in the choral classroom, one needs a brief history about F. M. Alexander, a basic description of the Alexander Technique, and some strategies to use in the choral classroom.

F. M. Alexander

Frederick Matthias Alexander (1869 – 1955) was an aspiring Shakespearean actor frustrated by varying degrees of voice loss during and after performance. After seeking medical treatment and finding no cure, he decided the problem lay in how he used his body for recitation. He set up mirrors to observe himself and noticed he was unknowingly pulling his head back and down during recitation, placing pressure on voice. Upon training himself to not use his body in this way, his vocal ability was restored. Intrigued by this discovery, Alexander applied his technique to other habits and activities in his life. He also began helping people around him apply this technique to their habits and activities. Later he began teaching the application of his technique to others. His teaching motivated him to document his studies and practices. He wrote four books documenting his discoveries and describing the relationship between body and mind, defining what has come to be called the Alexander Technique.

The Alexander Technique

The Alexander Technique (AT) is a method of helping to improve one's efficiency at a given task by guiding him/her to recognize inefficient habits, and "inhibiting" them, subsequently relearning that task with increased efficiency. It has otherwise been labeled psychophysical re-education. Alexander discovered that tension in his body was directly related to the tension in his neck. In their book, *How to Learn the Alexander Technique*, Barbara Conable and William Conable (1995) identify two Laws of Movement drawn from Alexander's discoveries:

LAW I: Habituated tensing of the muscles of the neck results in a predictable and inevitable tensing of the whole body. Release out of the tensing in the whole must begin with release in the muscles in the neck (p. 4).

LAW II: In movement, when it's free, the head leads and the body follows. More particularly, the head leads and the body follows in sequence (p. 7).

The heart of the AT lies in the relationship of the head, or primary control, to the rest of the body. Conable and Conable (1995) assert in their Laws of Movement that once the head is released and free on the top of the spine, the muscles of the neck can relax. When the neck muscles relax, the rest of the body can relax in a chain reaction. When the head-neck relationship is tense, the abdominal and back muscles become tensed in order to keep the spine erect, the face poised forward, and the body from collapsing due to the downward pull of gravity (p. 13). In the case of singing, any use of the abdominal muscles for something other than breathing to produce sound is detrimental to the efficiency of singing. Likewise, the positioning of the head and any resultant tensing of the neck muscles decrease the freedom of the muscles of the larynx, or voice box, therefore affecting the tone produced. By releasing the head upward and allowing the spine to lengthen, the head becomes better balanced on the spine. As the head becomes balanced on the top of the spine, the neck muscles are able to relax and the larynx is allowed to “hang” in a natural position. In addition, the muscles of the torso (specifically the abdominal muscles) can relax resulting in a lower, “deeper” breath (Hudson, 2002, p.14). This alignment of the body and resulting release of unnecessary tension also allows muscles to be poised for efficient execution of the tasks required in singing—not only singing, but every task we ask of our bodies. The only problem is, like Alexander himself, we do not always have an awareness of what our bodies are doing because what we are doing at any given moment feels

comfortable, or normal, to us. As we change our level of awareness, and relearn ways of doing the tasks we do each day, what is comfortable and normal also changes. (Alexander called this “faulty sensory perception”.) Therefore, we cannot compare the feelings of the AT with what is, or has been, “normal”. Alice Pryor, a teacher of the AT and a member of the staff of the VoiceCare Network, writes, “I believe that the Alexander Technique is a ‘dynamic posture’. It is not about erect position...The Alexander Technique is about the efficient, comfortable, and flexible use of our whole body that in turn enables efficient, flexible use of our voices (Thurmon & Welsch, 2000, p.761).

Strategies for the Choral Classroom

As stated above, until the last 15 – 20 years, the AT has been associated with professional dancers, actors and musicians. Since then, the AT has crept into curricula at the collegiate level and is working its way into the high school level courses. In high school, a need still exists for Alexander-friendly strategies that can be applied to younger, more insecure, students and also in group settings such as group voice lessons or a rehearsal with a choir.

The strategies below have been selected from personal experiences, paper sources, and web sites. Not all were in line with AT teaching practices, but those that were not, have been adapted, or aligned, to do so. In addition, the strategies presented are introductory and chosen to be easily introduced into a choral classroom. The list begins with mapping the joints of the whole body, introduces experimentation at the head and neck, continues downward through the body, and involves only some attention to singing and breathing. The questions associated with each strategy have been added by the author as examples of the types of questions an AT teacher would ask. Questioning is an integral part of the AT, and teaching in general, and should be

included in the process of introducing the strategies to students. Due to the flexible and individual nature of the AT, the strategies must be adaptable and adapted to the students in any group. This adaptable nature of the strategies, in some cases, may cause them to appear sketchy or undefined.

Teaching the AT in the choral classroom requires time to allow students to become comfortable with the strategies that bring about a new level of bodily awareness. Students will need to repeat the activities numerous times to develop an awareness of the changes happening in their bodies. Spreading a group of activities over the course of a quarter or semester, and exploring them for a short time each day, provides this time and repetition without overwhelming students. Both students and teacher must become familiar with the commands and questions that promote the freedom, release, and self-evaluation common to the AT. Initial experiences with the technique may leave students disoriented as to the purpose of the activities in which they are participating because the AT avoids giving students direction toward what they “should” sense, requiring them to sense for themselves. In any situation, group or individual, the AT requires teacher questioning and the sharing of student “observations” which, in turn, stimulates the interest, and awareness of the student. Students need to be reassured that confusion is allowed and that there are not right or wrong answers to questions, only *their* answers.

Mapping.

Understanding how the body is designed to move, breathe, make sound, etc., affects how we attempt to use it. Conable & Conable (1995) argue that developing an accurate body

map is important because inaccuracies in the way we understand our body cause us to use it incorrectly and therefore, with decreased efficiency (p. 32).

strategy.

On a blank piece of paper, ask students to draw a human body and circle the “joints”.

Provide a “correct” map by way of graphics or a model skeleton, and review the similarities and differences in the maps. After asking the questions below, demonstrate and/or discuss some common mapping errors students discovered.

questions.

- “Did you include all the joints?”
- “Did you locate the joints in the correct places?”
- “What joint(s) confused you the most?”

reflection.

I encountered this strategy at the VoiceCare Network impact course and it was very effective in identifying mapping errors. One common mapping error is the shoulder. The shoulder is significant because voice teachers often will address the position of the shoulders when discussing posture for singing. Conable & Conable (1995) explain that very often individuals map their bodies with a single shoulder joint, but this is not correct. If the shoulder had only one joint, it could not be brought up toward the ear. In fact, the shoulder has two joints. The bones of the shoulder are the clavicle (or collarbone) and the scapula (or shoulder blade) and they are only connected to the torso by one joint, the collarbone at the sternum. The shoulder “joint” begins with the joint at which the clavicle meets the sternum, includes the point where the other end of the clavicle meets the scapula, and includes the ball and socket joint on the scapula that

allows the upper arm to rotate in such a wide array of directions (pp. 52-53). Very often there is at least one student in a choir that has broken a collarbone. They can quickly become living proof for other students that when the collarbone is broken the arm cannot be raised beyond the point at which the shoulder begins to rise. Some students tend to respond positively to the explanation that shoulders function similarly to the independent front suspension advertised in pick-up truck ads on television. Understanding the shoulder in this way often allows a release of tension in the shoulders yielding an increased freedom of motion and a widening in the torso. Widening will be discussed later.

As mentioned in the Conable's Laws of Movement above (1995), releasing tension in the neck allows the head to move forward and up, away from the shoulders, allowing the body to follow lengthening and widening. Lengthening and widening, then, are results of relaxation, a state of being that allows one a more easy breath (p. 5). However, for most people, whether sitting or standing, a varying degree of slouching is part of their habitual posture. Slouching is shortening and narrowing, a reduction of freedom of movement. Because counteracting habitual slouch is challenging, lengthening strategies make up more of the examples here.

Lengthening at the neck

The strategy below is designed to help students find their length by placing their hands on the areas of their body in order to bring a sense of awareness to that area.

strategy.

Place a hand, fingers together, on the neck at the base of the skull. The fingers, close together, “are” the vertebrae in the neck. Slowly let the space between the fingers and the vertebrae grow. Return to your habitual stance, lengthen again and compare the feelings of both.

questions.

- “What did you feel?”
- “How is this feeling different?”
- “What is the same?”
- “Any other observations?”

reflection.

This strategy can be useful as a visual reminder for students to lengthen; once it is introduced, it can be recalled quickly by the teacher moving his or her hand to the back of the neck. Non-verbal reminders such as this are extremely efficient tools to elicit desired responses from students without pausing the rehearsal, or lesson, to talk. Reminding students to check their length is part of the process of forming new habits—the habits that will make these students better singers. This is another strategy learned at the VoiceCare Network impact course.

Notice that the student places hands on him/herself and the teacher’s hands are not on the student. Alexander teachers are trained to use their hands in such a way as to guide the student (and can do so effectively) “to length;” high school voice teachers are not trained to use their hands in this way, and it is good advice to leave this skill to the Alexander

teachers. Moreover, it is common for many high school students to be uncomfortable in a voice lesson; the degree of contact used by an Alexander teacher could risk alienating the student and/or endanger the teacher's career.

Lengthening II

Michael McCallion (1988) provides this strategy designed to allow students to realize the amount of lengthening possible in their whole spine as compared to their habitual standing position. It is best performed with a reference mark, a partner, or both to keep track of whether the student is actually losing height or not (p. 49). (Students may feel they are, and actually are not, losing height, or vice versa.)

strategy.

While standing with the feet apart, allow the knees to bend forward over the toes. Keep the sense of going up, and do not allow yourself to lose height. Continue letting your knees go until you reach the point at which you must lose height, always maintaining the release into length (McCallion, 1988, p.49).

questions.

- “What did you discover?”
- “Who felt something different?”
- “Any other observations?”

reflection.

When this strategy is done with a partner, the person who observes often learns more than the person doing the activity. The observer has the opportunity to see the lengthening take place. Once students see the lengthening effect in the bodies of others, they can

begin to map the changes in their own bodies; in essence, they learn where to feel sensations of lengthening. Switching roles allows those who observed to model for their partners who then can share the same benefits of the strategy. Students must be continually cautioned not to tense muscles in order to lengthen their bodies but to relax into length (holding, or forcing, a body into a long/tall posture will cause the body to tire and droop back into the old habit).

Lengthening III

A variety of strategies provides variety for students, helping to keep students engaged in the learning process. Each strategy often shines a different light on the same subject, especially in the eyes of the wide variety of students in a choir.

strategy.

Stand with the feet hip-width apart, balancing your weight evenly between both feet and evenly between the balls and the heels. Allow your torso to hang forward as if you are touching your toes. Slowly raise your torso to a vertical position, allowing one vertebra at a time to line up from your tailbone to your head.

questions.

- “How does this feel?”
- “How is it different from the way you “habitually” stand?”
- “Any other observations?”

reflection.

This “stacking” strategy has been used in choir rooms for many years. I experienced this in college. It is designed to cause students to think about (map) their spine, observing

how it moves and feels “stacked” when it is aligned. Again, causing students to consider the ways they use their bodies for any given task is part of the AT. This strategy can be employed during warm-ups to help physically prepare for singing. It also works well late in rehearsals or during long rehearsals to get bodies moving, break monotony, refocus attentions, and remind singers of the alignment of their bodies.

Lengthening IV

This lengthening strategy is quoted directly from Thurmon & Welch (2000), *Bodymind and Voice: Foundations of Voice Education*, the textbook for the *VoiceCare Network*, to demonstrate the possible detail and use of imagination—the questions are built into the activity.

strategy.

While standing, balance your body comfortably so that mobility potential is optimum. Now, use your imagination (even the impossible becomes possible). Imagine that helium-filled balloons are being attached to your shoulders, upper chest and back, and to your head—random and even distribution. You cannot sense the points of attachment, so they are very comfortable.

At some point, suppose that enough balloons have been attached to all of those places so that you can feel them affect your body. As the balloons are added, what’s happening? As your body is relieved of the downward influence of gravity, how is your body reacting? If your feet literally start to push your body

upward, you imagined too many balloons. Remove some, so that you just notice the effect on your body alignment. What does “anti-gravity” feel like?

With your body arranged that way, sing a phrase of a song that has some high and loud pitches in it. Take your time to select one. Sing it and remember how your voice felt and sounded (p. 329).

reflection.

In a group setting, it may be a good idea to pre-select a song that the group can sing together so as to avoid an environment of noise, poor vocal use, and hearing loss.

Widening

Choir directors often address the length of the singers but less frequently address width, or breadth. In order to be at our widest, we must be relaxed. Tension in the torso will pull inward on the rib cage as well as inward and downward on the shoulders constricting the movement of the torso, limiting the expansion of the lungs, and affecting breath management.

strategy.

Stand with the feet hips-width apart; balance your weight evenly between both feet and evenly between the balls and the heels. Clasp your hands behind you and feel the stretch sensation across your chest. Allow your head, neck, and rib cage to release upward. Gently release arms to your sides; check that your wrists and hands are relaxed. Return to your habit and repeat the activity. Compare this stance to your habit (Rubin, 2003).

questions.

- “Can you share some differences you have observed?”
- “Who can share something different from (student’s name) ?”

reflection.

Coaching students to recognize their width, to check their width regularly, and to release to a position of maximum width frees the muscles of the abdomen for efficient breathing, allows the body to maintain an easy, fee alignment, and conserves energy for the task of singing (tension requires energy). Young singers must be made aware that the lengthening and widening will help them be better singers. Often young singers will say that these strategies are to help them look better on stage. Though they definitely will look better standing lengthened and widened, the changes in posture will provide them with the ability to take in, and manage, more air, influencing their phrasing, pitch accuracy, range, and tone quality. In some case, singers may not become aware of the subtle differences in their poise and abilities for some time.

Aligning the pelvis

This strategy always gets some “looks”. Once the initial shock of the pelvic motion is over, students can begin to observe the position of their pelvis as part of their posture; for many people this realization has not occurred. Some students learn to use the position of their pelvis to gauge the amount of “slouch” in their bodies. By addressing the ankles, the knees, the pelvis, torso, neck, and head, singers can realize the chain reaction response of the body to downward pull as well as lengthening and widening.

strategy.

While standing, place your hands on what is commonly known as your hips (a mapping error—actually the upper rim of your pelvis). Tilt the top your pelvis forward and backward.

questions.

- “What do you observe?”
- “When you tilt, where else do you notice movement?”
- “When you tilt forward, what do you feel in your knees? And backward?”
- “When you tilt, what do you feel in your torso (back or front, high or low)?”

reflection.

This strategy is a fun and engaging if introduced as an “Elvis Contest.” The “Elvis” movement causes the muscles controlling the pelvis to release and free. It will be impossible for students to maintain optimum length and freedom for any amount of time unless the pelvis is aligned. Likewise, the pelvis will only be allowed to align if the head is released upward and the spine is lengthened. Due to the downward pull of gravity¹⁶, the head compresses on the top of the spine. The downward movement of the head generally shifts the head forward and the spine reacts by rounding in the shoulder area, dropping the rib cage and shifting the pelvis back on top and/or forward on the bottom. When standing, the knees feel the tendency to lock in order to provide stability. When sitting, the lower back will want to slouch and the pelvis tilt backwards. By bringing awareness to these tendencies, resulting from gravity, students are able to monitor their own habits. Once this awareness is brought about, students begin to carry themselves differently not only when singing but in a routine daily task like walking to class.

Knees and ankles

Most of us were taught as young singers that if we locked our knees, we would faint. Though it is true that locking our knees immobilizes the legs resulting in reduced circulation of blood back to the heart, and therefore an increased risk of fainting, it is of equal importance that students realize that the immobilization of the legs affects how our bodies maintain balance.

strategy.

Prompt students, “Say hello to your ankles.” Explain that their “hello” can be a mental check or a simple movement to discover that their ankles are free and unlocked. By having students move their ankles from time to time, they can discover that when their ankles are unlocked and free to move, their knees will be likewise.

questions.

- “When you move your ankles, what other joints move?”
- “Why do you think it might be important to keep those joints free?”

reflection.

Locking the knees decreases our balance causing a chain reaction of muscles to tense in order to hold our bodies in an erect position. As mentioned above, the muscles that tense to maintain balance are those that affect efficient breathing. Singers need not know all the details of how their locked knees affect their ability to sing. However, leading singers to some understanding of how their habits help or hinder their singing ability will motivate them to monitor themselves so that the director does not need to focus precious attention on the standing habits of each individual singer in the choir. When students

monitor themselves, and it becomes the norm for the choir, the group and its director can focus on the task of refining the performance.

One of Alexander's observations was the effect of gravity on the human body. Floor strategies are designed to eliminate gravity or at least, change the effect of gravity on our movements, therefore allowing us to rediscover our movements (McCallion, 1988, p. 46). One floor strategy is provided as an example.

The Slide

The Slide involves lying on the floor and sliding one's feet away from the body, allowing the knees to move from a raised position to a lowered position. McCallion (1988) illustrates two possible stages to this activity. Stage one is designed to aid the students in the discovery of body movement with a different relationship to gravity, specifically the area of the lower back. Stage two, more advanced and not described here, layers the "awareness" of breathing involving the release of the tongue and jaw, pressure of the breath, the upper ribs, lower back, and onset of tone (pp. 46-47).

strategy.

Lie on the floor with your head placed on a book (so it does not tilt too far back) with the knees raised (so the lower back is allowed to come in contact with the floor). Slide the feet (one or both) away from the body so the knees fall. The lower back can be allowed to remain in contact with the floor throughout the whole range of the slide. Stage one is to be repeated until the lower back is free to stay in contact with the floor during the whole range of the slide; after success at stage one it is possible to move to stage two.

questions.

- “As you slide your foot/feet, what do you notice about the relationship between your lower back and the floor?”
- “Do you notice a change in your breathing while lying down?”
- “What do you notice about the sound of your voice?”

reflection.

It is common to ask students of singing to lie down because it puts the body in a different relationship to gravity, therefore allowing the body to lengthen and widen as Alexander suggests. Students will often notice differences in their tone and breathing. The lying position described here is also called the semi-supine position; it is used by many Alexander teachers as a technique for promoting the relaxation of tense muscles and as a position for teaching and reviewing breathing.

It must be reiterated that the strategies above are introductory and can be used with singers of any age. Likewise, there are as many variations of these strategies as there are voice teachers; this is not an exhaustive list by any stretch of the imagination. This list does, however, provide some examples of how to adapt strategies to be “Alexander-friendly” or how to create one’s own strategies that work in harmony with the AT.

Though any voice teacher/choir director can use the strategies above with positive results, the next portion of this document ventures to shed some light on how the unique experiences of learning the AT might help one use the same strategies more effectively. The following is my personal account, having taken a class in the AT, showing how the AT is taught and learned; it presents the student perspective but includes some teacher comments and directions as well. It

is hoped that, through this account, the reader will gain a perspective of what the AT is and how it is applied—that singers are not taught the AT, but, rather, it is the teacher’s understanding of, and application of, the AT within his/her own body that informs his/her teaching of each student. It also is hoped that the reader will recognize the potential effectiveness and efficiency of the AT and feel some of the excitement of learning and applying it in a teaching situation.

Part II

It had been 8 years since I had taken the VoiceCare impact course and became interested in the AT. Finally, I had heard of an in-state course in the AT. I discovered I could attend and quickly enrolled. I soon found out the teachers were some of the best in the United States and known internationally for their teaching of the AT. Their names are Carol Boggs, Martha Hansen Fertman, and Michael Frederick. Two of these teachers were one “generation” away from F. M. Alexander; they were taught by Marjorie Barstow and Walter Carrington, students of F. M. Alexander. I had a great introduction to the AT by Alice Pryor as part of the VoiceCare Network, and I had changed some of my body-use habits. Still, in that eight-year span between my introduction to the AT through the VoiceCare Network and the AT course described here, I had developed some habits of *overdoing*. One of the main ideas of the AT is to change an unwanted habit by inhibiting the action (as opposed to doing a different action instead). The best example of my over“doing” is a “chin tuck” I had developed into my posture. Assuredly, this tuck was to ensure that my neck be long to keep my head moved up, away from my shoulders. (In addition, I especially wanted to impress the teachers with my “understanding” of the AT.) I became aware of this chin tuck when it was pointed out to me in “walk-about” one morning.

Walk-about is a time where an AT teacher guides the student to a more free, and upright, posture which the student then applies to walking for a short distance; the teacher walks with the student, coaching along the way. The chin tuck was pointed out by all three of our teachers throughout our week-long course. Since then, I always check on this bit of *doing* in order to remove it from my daily routine. What else did I take away? The answer is much.

Four days to a First Step

The AT makes much sense. It is, for the most part, easy to understand. That said, it is so hard to do, or to “non-do” as the case may be. I will attempt to explain through my own experience with walking. Our class began on Tuesday evening and ran until Sunday afternoon. On Saturday morning in walk-about, four days later, Michael Frederick complimented me on a good “first step.” In our first walk-about, I worked with Martha Fertman and Carol Boggs. Both of them stopped and removed their hands from me when I would assume my usual “chin tuck” posture. Both included the word “stop” in their interaction with me. Michael’s response was the same the next morning, “No, stop,” he said. Even though I understood what not to do, I was still fighting within myself to *not* do it. About Thursday, my back was slightly achy and had what I call, mini back spasms. I mentioned this to Martha. She responded in a surprising way, by suggesting that my pelvis was not “connected” to the rest of my torso, that even though my head and neck were moving “forward and up,” my pelvis was being carried along; I was working hard, but my body was not necessarily following my head and neck. Getting my whole torso to work as a team required some degree of releasing my pelvis, allowing it to “roll” a bit forward on top. I could feel my knees unlock. I walked for 15 steps or so before moving to a different teacher’s line. I wondered how long my pelvis was “walking around” in this sort of “locked up”

way. The next day, in walkabouts, I needed to be reminded of my pelvic “connection.” After the reminders, the feeling of walking began smoothly and gave way to a downshifting feeling as my body would return to my habitual walking pattern. After a few steps, my body would seem to fall backwards, out of balance, with the feeling of sinking into my knees. Martha reassured me and reminded me to learn from this feeling. I started to chuckle about it. This same feeling happened in my private AT lesson with Carol on Saturday afternoon (the last full day), but we had time to study it a bit and go beyond. I walked farther without “down shifting” and she challenged me to go a step further, including that my knee movement, rather than my center of gravity, lead my body forward. I took a few “good steps” before the lesson was over. The walk from the lesson to the dining hall for lunch, was about the most awkward-feeling trek I can remember making. I felt “drunk.” I would shift forward and then backward in my gait; my knees would lock and unlock; I felt out of balance. I laughed to myself the whole way. A twenty-minute lesson in the Alexander Technique (after four days of immersion) had me staggering. I laughed because it was evident to me that my body was attempting to write a new program, or “unwrite” an old program.

My body was confused. This reminds me of a line I learned at the VoiceCare Network, “Confusion is the first step in learning.” I use this line with my students all the time; now I had a deeper understanding of the phrase. Could I have been learning how to walk all over again? My first reaction to this question is a whole-hearted, “yes.” The assumption is that the confusion comes when one of the teachers helps me find my length, width and balance, causing different parts of my brain to “argue” with one another. Maybe the discussion sounds like this:

The part of my brain that has been studying the Alexander Technique (Let's call him, Neck Freely.) thinks, "Hey, this is it. This feels good." After a few steps, another part of my brain (curiously named Status Quo) says in a rather upset tone, "Hey, we're walking. This isn't the way we do this. Everything was fine a minute ago. I had just pulled my cap over my senses and was falling into oblivion and somebody comes along and changes everything. What gives? We've never walked this way, not that I can remember. This is upsetting! Now cut this out, and get back to the usual so I can rest." As a result, I begin to return to habit. Then, an argument ensues:

N. Freely: "Hey, let's try walking this other way. It's new and exciting. Look, our neck is free, our head is moving forward and up, allowing..."

S. Quo: (Adjusting the controls) "Shut up! Who put you in charge? I have been running this process since Dave attended that VoiceCare Network thing a few years back. We've been doing just fine, haven't we? 'Forward and up,' what do you know? @#%! I need rest. (Yawning) Winter is coming fast, and things could get slippery."

Freely: (Re-aligning the controls, with renewed determination.) "Listen, Dave has enrolled in another of those courses you call hogwash. We're being taught how to do things with better efficiency—more economically. You don't want to end up using a walker do you? Besides, this way might get us an A in this class. Forward and up gets us more distance per calorie, and this better balance should help us on the ice."

Quo: (Nearly in tears with frustration). “This just doesn’t feel right. The head-neck relationship is all different. The knees don’t lock. I’ve never had to worry about the pelvic throttle; I just left it in the usual position. If the ankles don’t snap with every step, I’m sure I’ll fall completely asleep. This is an accident just waiting to happen.”

Freely: “Look, you can still do everything you did before. You’ll just have to check with him first (gesturing forward).”

Quo: “Who’s that?”

Freely: “That’s Conscious Awareness. You think your life is different. His office is flooded with questions. He’s supposed to gather information from everywhere, visual center, auditory, tactile, muscle memory. Life is practically upside down in that office lately. They may need to hire, and that’s good for the unemployment rate. He has hardly slept at all these last four days, and he’s used to getting upwards of 20 hours a day.”

Being relatively new to the AT, or psycho-physical re-education, I’m sure this skit is an over-simplification of what I was experiencing (but I think it is a fun way to explain it). Until my awareness could settle some arguments in me and change some habits, my body did not know what to do. The confusion gave way to some funny feelings and exciting discoveries, physical and mental fatigue too. I was excited about the confusion; I saw it as progress. Apparently, I had taken away enough “old habit” through this experience to undo myself into a

different gait, if only for a while. In order to continue on this path to increased efficiency, I must continue to be open to a new level of awareness.

Awareness of Unawareness...and Fear:

So many times, the AT teachers would indicate that something was “there,” or ask what I felt; I felt little or nothing. Where was my awareness? I was certain the ability to answer would come with more learning, but I wanted progress to be immediate. I had been aware for some time that, as a teacher of singing, I often miss visual input because I focus so intensely on hearing my students sing. I was aware that, as a choral conductor, I often visually “miss” seeing the singers in front of me because I am focused so intensely on listening. Another reason for this visual “block” could be because I worry about making my cues, doing a great job, and or not doing enough to provide for my students’ success. Were these worries stifling my awareness?

I had always considered the AT to be about efficient body use. That is the way it first was presented to me. In one of our class discussions, I was intrigued by the suggestion that the AT is a way of handling fear or “performance anxiety.” I realized a long time ago that I am motivated out of fear, the fear of being wrong or bad. The combination of trying to be effective, efficient, and “right,” sends me into a state of performance anxiety as I worry about all the details I must handle. I realized that, as a result of all this anxiety, I become less effective, less efficient, less “right,” and more frustrated with myself and with my students. I, in effect, paralyze myself, my senses, my awareness with fear. To dwell on all the demands, and potential shortfalls, that face a choral conductor can be overwhelming, even paralyzing. To avoid unnecessary fear, or an unmanageable amount of fear, it is better to allow oneself to think in the present moment rather than try to deal with moments past or moments yet to come. The present

moment is the only time we have any control of what our bodies are doing. We can be certain that during any present moment some form of stress may present itself. The best way we can deal with that stress is to operate in our most efficient means possible, “wishing our necks to be free, allowing our heads to move forward and up, away from our shoulders, and our bodies to follow, lengthening and widening.” I believe students of the AT are taught to come back to this mantra because it brings one back to the present, a state of mind where one can choose to make any necessary changes in the present course of action.

A conscious decision liberates:

I eventually made mention to all three Alexander teachers of what I refer to as mini back spasms. Michael advised me to, “Stop working so hard,” and Martha indicated that I might be disconnecting my pelvic region. Carol speculated later in the week that Alexander work sometimes causes people to use various muscles differently, and sometimes those muscles need some conditioning. I considered all these ideas. As a result, I decided I *was* working too hard; it was futile to try to sit “right” all the time. When one of the students sat with her rump on the front edge of the chair seat and her neck on the chair back, I was surprised when she was directed to stay seated that way while the teacher worked with her in that position. This made me think about my own efforts to “be right.” Combining this information with a comical reference to “Alexand-roids” early in the course (a description of students of the AT who begin to stand, and move, like androids), and other instances where I became aware of working to maintain a certain poise/position/length, I realized that I needed to be comfortable. I finally decided to cheat at one of the activities and moved a chair with one hand, lifting it with my outstretched arm and raised shoulder(s), flying in the face of what was most efficient. I felt like a rebel. I considered the

thoughts of the rebellious person. Stereotypically, the rebel is usually living on the fringe of society. He/she is “out there somewhere,” a “liberal,” or a “free-thinker.” The Alexander Technique is about freedom. “I wish my neck to be free....” As part of our class, we discussed how liberating the Alexander Technique was. Though I agreed, I wondered—more accurately, worried—whether I completely understood. After some deliberation, I decided I was making choices about how I was using myself. I felt empowered to make those choices, and I was not going to be judged negatively if I chose to slump in my seat—I did not need to fear. I felt liberated.

Teaching, Learning and Practicing:

Experiences with the AT have reminded me that learning is from the inside out, governed by the conscious awareness of taking information into ourselves and using it to make conscious decisions. Teachers of the AT patiently guide their students toward conscious awareness, an awareness of themselves in the present moment. In the present moment, students can choose how to react, or whether to react, to the various stimuli they perceive. Alexander teachers guide students by providing the example of their own fluid movement, by posing questions that direct their students’ attention inward, and by recalling reminders of F. M. Alexander’s teachings. Their teaching trademark is their unique, “hands on” approach to teaching what the AT feels like in the body. The teacher’s hands seem to be an interface with the student. Through this interface, Alexander teachers have developed great skill at feeling how their student is using his/her body. By comparing this feeling to that of their own length, width, proper alignment, and balance, Alexander teachers can guide their students to find the appropriate length, width, alignment and resulting balance. By coaching students back to this free, relaxed feeling and

showing us what it feels like to stand, sit, and walk with length, the student gradually comes to an awareness of when they are, and are not, using their bodies in this efficient way. Through this awareness of themselves, the student learns to apply the AT to anything, and everything, they do.

It is important to remember that the AT involves the management of fear. Therefore, it is imperative that teachers of the technique maintain a non-judgmental, shame-free, and fear-free environment. Since many people fear judgment or shame, feelings of judgment and shame will translate into fear for the student. The interjection of fear into an Alexander lesson (a voice lesson too) brings with it the likelihood that the student will pull down and back in the head and neck, counteracting the teaching. This is why teachers of the AT, and all excellent teachers for that matter, explain complex ideas with metaphors, give clear and concise directions, and exude patience. In my observations, the Alexander teachers gave many, and thorough, instructions about how things were to be done in class. Any behaviors that were counterproductive were met only with explanations of what would improve the situation. There was always helpful prompting, positive reinforcement and detailed direction.

Since an Alexander teacher cannot follow us through life, it is important to continue seeking a teacher's guidance from time to time. In between those times, we practice. Practicing the Alexander Technique requires frequent checking of one's own daily use, employing positive reinforcement, and providing permission to make mistakes. My fascination with the technique continues as I notice the tension I hold in my arms as I am doing other daily tasks that, interestingly enough, often do not require the use of my arms at all. Further attention has caused me to realize that when my arm is tense, my shoulder and neck are also tense. As I notice unnecessary tension, I chuckle to myself as a reward for noticing it; then I release it and continue in what I am doing. One interesting area of study for me is standing. One of the teachers said,

“Standing is dynamic; it’s not parking.” As I stand, I systematically check my head and neck, my pelvis and hips, and my knees/ankles for freedom, making sure I am unlocked and moveable. Standing like this is practice for me. I do not work at this every minute I stand; it would be mentally and physically exhausting. I pursue a “dynamic stance” when I become aware that I am “parked” with locked joints, when I am aware that the time is right to practice, and when I choose to practice. The choice allows me the choice to stay as I am and blend in with those around me or to assume countless other postures. Life is more fun that way.

The Next Step:

Throughout the AT course, I practiced my body use and the use of “material objects.” Material objects are what our bodies use to perform a certain task such as chairs, silverware, cups, lawn tools, etc. As a commuter to class, I had a lot of time to “study” how I drive my car. I tried different positions holding the steering wheel, driving left-handed, right-handed, and two-handed; I also tried various seat positions. While driving with both hands on the wheel, both arms were able to be more relaxed, one counter-balancing the other. When driving one-handed, I realized I often held tension in both arms/shoulders, even though one arm was lying on my lap or on the armrest. Every so often, I would become aware of the hair on the back of my head gently brushing the headrest, an unfamiliar feeling resulting from my body alignment and the position of my head and neck.

The example of driving my car illustrates the awareness, freedom and flexibility I want to be able to sense in all my life-activities. As a music teacher, I apply this sense of awareness to how I use myself at the piano, at the computer, in putting pen to paper, in singing, and the like. In one instance, I was encouraged to experiment with “conducting less.” Comments from fellow

students suggested that I might be able to increase the potential of drawing my singers to me, improving my communication with them, by reducing the over-doing in my gesture. Possibly even more importantly, I play with permitting myself to make mistakes. I make mistakes anyway; releasing myself from the burden of trying not to make any mistakes, or do too much at once, might help me to avoid sending myself into a state of performance anxiety, podium deafness, or podium blindness (not hearing or seeing the singers in front of me).

I had not heard of the concept of “soft eyes” before. “Soft eyes” means to broaden your field of view, increasing your visual perception in more of a “picture window” way than in a “binocular” way. I believe it to be coupled with being consciously aware of what you are seeing, not fixating on small details, but taking in the general shapes and movements of something or someone, even if it is not completely in focus. I continue to be interested in experimenting with this concept. Applying this to my teaching has helped reduce the aforementioned visual block; it has helped me be a more effective vocal coach.

At the beginning of the course, I wanted to take away strategies to use in my classroom, strategies to include in part one of this paper; strategies that provide for healthy, more efficient singing. I continue to utilize the semi-supine, position to teach breathing. I continue to ask students to move while singing. I ask students to experiment with activities we did in this Alexander course: “breathing into the back,” “whispered ahs,” and counting techniques. I do not limit my teaching to only the activities listed in this paper. After all, the AT is not a collection of activities I can use to improve myself, or to help others improve. The AT is an awareness of me in the present moment, doing whatever I am choosing to do. It is the awareness that I have the freedom to choose how I use myself to do a given task, how I perceive myself within my surroundings, how I react in everyday life as well as in performance situations. I continue to

check on some of those habits that cause me to be less efficient in the daily use of my body. My students encounter the AT through my use. They need not know of the AT; I do not feel it necessary to tell them. I would rather my students recall “the way we learned,” or better yet, “the way we discovered” the ability to do a given skill. When operating in the present moment, handling the daily stresses in an efficient way, and teaching in a reduced-fear environment, my students’ daily classroom experiences are more effective, more meaningful. Through the Alexander Technique, we all benefit.

Summary

Young singers desire to “work hard” so that they can sing their best. Still, they often wrestle with fear of failure or the belief that they just are not good enough. Teachers of voice are constantly searching out, and creating, strategies that transcend their students’ “hard work,” or anxieties in order to release, and free, the “natural” voice. F. M. Alexander learned how to do this for himself and began helping others discover it too. The Alexander Technique has become a widely used method of professional voice teachers throughout the world. The AT can be used in the choral classroom to allow young singers to discover a natural, easy approach to singing. The research presented here only scratches the surface of innumerable AT strategies used, or able to be used, in the high school choral classroom. The strategies presented are designed only to introduce students to efficient singing by way of the AT. Yet, the most interesting aspect of this technique is that the voice teacher is more effective when applying the AT to him/herself rather than to the student. The strategies are more effective for the students if the teacher is consciously aware of his/her own head/neck relationship, seeing and hearing the singer through

the AT. By learning to sing with efficiency at a young age, it is hoped that singing will be a more healthy, joyous, and life-long experience.

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