

Manner and Conditions of Use

A crucial distinction in teaching the Alexander Technique and Alexander teacher training

Joe Armstrong

About the author

See
www.alexanderstudies.org/author/joe-armstrong

Correspondence

Direct to editor@alexanderstudies.org

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Abstract

Descriptions of the goals of the Alexander Technique are varied and therefore often confusing or misleading to the general public and to authorities who are beginning to examine the nature of the Technique for purposes of accreditation and research. Greater clarity and conciseness is needed in such descriptions in order for the Technique to achieve the broad recognition and acceptance that Alexander and most of the teachers he trained so hoped for. A critical distinction between Alexander's terms "manner of use" and "conditions of use" has generally been overlooked, and teaching factions have arisen that emphasize dealing with manner of use to the exclusion of dealing with conditions of use—particularly in the United States. This article also attempts to discuss the reasons behind the emergence of these factions in the hope that greater clarity and unity of purpose can be gained as the profession attempts to move forward in significant ways with regard to the requirements necessary for becoming a fully-qualified Alexander teacher, a trainer of Alexander teachers, and for providing an accurate basis for conducting scientific research into Alexander's various claims.

A missing link

In recent writing on voluntary self-regulation and unity in the Alexander profession, much of the discussion about what constitutes adequate teaching and teacher training seems to be missing a key factor that Alexander and most of the teachers he trained considered an integral part of both activities. I am referring to the distinction traditionally made between the expressions "manner of use" and "conditions of use."

Manner of use pertains, of course, to how we do things—respond, behave, direct our neck-head-torso-limb relationship, etc.—whether we do them consciously or subconsciously. Conditions of use pertains mainly to the quality of muscle tonus (anywhere from extreme tightness to extreme flaccidity) that exists in us regardless of how good or how poor our manner of use may be at any given moment and regardless of whether the qualities of tonus are long-standing or more recently built up. In either case, conditions of use usually cannot be altered immediately at

will, whereas most aspects of manner of use can be through a brief application of the skills of inhibiting and directing.

Complete Alexander teaching and teacher training attempts to deal with both manner and conditions of use—perhaps emphasizing one more than the other at times, but never one to the exclusion of the other, since they are so interdependent. For instance, skilled traditional "chair work" (like "application work") seems to focus mainly on pupils' manner of use, but their conditions can also be greatly influenced if the chair work is prolonged for more than a few moments. Likewise, traditional "table work" seems to focus on improving students' conditions, but their manner of use can be significantly addressed then too if their attention to inhibiting and directing is sufficiently engaged—for instance, with regard to speaking and listening during conversation, reciting a poem or text, singing, etc.

The absence of the concepts of manner and conditions of use in recent writing on self-regulation and

unity seems to reflect the growing lack of understanding of them that has been especially noticeable in the U.S. among the newer teachers, trainees, and students I have met who have trained and studied here. Many of them speak as if the Alexander Technique is only about teaching an improved manner of use, which they usually signify just by the single word “use.” When I bring up the term conditions of use, most of them say they have never heard of it and do not have any idea of what it might mean. But both terms were in common use during my own training (1969-1972) and they have continued to be a staple in most discussions of the Technique I’ve had since then, both with first-generation teachers I’ve known well, such as Walter and Dilys Carrington, Peggy Williams, Elizabeth Walker, Frank Pierce Jones, and Kitty Wielopolska as well as with most second-generation colleagues from my training years and before.

Background in Alexander literature

Alexander himself, as with other terms he used, seems to be in the process of clarifying the meanings of these two expressions over the course of his writings. For example, he appears to employ the terms “use” and “conditions of use” almost interchangeably in the following segment from Chapter I of *The Use of the Self*:

In the work that followed I came to see that to get a direction of my use which would ensure this satisfactory reaction, I must cease to rely upon the feeling associated with my instinctive direction, and in its place employing reasoning processes, in order

- (1) to analyse the **conditions of use** present;
- (2) to select (reason out) the means whereby a more satisfactory use could be brought about;
- (3) to project consciously the directions required for putting these means into effect. ¹ [Emphasis added]

Alexander doesn't bring in the expression “manner of use” until Chapter III, “The Golfer Who Cannot Keep His Eyes on the Ball”:

In the present instance there can be no doubt that the particular end he has in view is to make a good stroke, which means that the moment he begins to play he starts to work for that end directly, without considering what **manner of use** of his mechanisms generally would be the best for the making of a good stroke. ² [Emphasis added]

Of course, the chapters on golf and stuttering are primarily concerned (as are the first two chapters of *The Use of the Self*) with manner of use because Alexander is mainly focusing on how the particular actions are performed in each case. Even so, by page 80 in Chapter IV, “The Stutterer,” he is using the two expressions side by side in distinction from each other:

Change the **manner of use** and you change the **conditions** throughout the organism; the old reaction associated with the old **manner of use** and the old

conditions cannot therefore take place, for the means are no longer there. ³ [Emphasis added]

But by 1941, in Chapter II of *The Universal Constant in Living*, “The Constant Influence of Manner of Use in Relation to Diagnosis,” he makes the differentiation between the terms clearest when he describes the result of a course of lessons he gave to “Mr. B,” an osteo-arthritis patient of Dr. Caldwell of Westmorland:

Such a change could not have been brought about without the inhibition of his **habitual manner of use**, for this was **associated with** misdirection and the **high degree of muscle tension throughout the organism**, and was *indirectly* responsible for much of the overaction of the muscle groups resulting in the spasm. The **change made in his use** through the inhibition of this misdirection brought about many **changes in conditions**, including a lowering of the standard of muscle tension throughout the organism generally, and, with it, a reduction of the undue tension involved in the spasm. ⁴ [emphasis added]

Obviously, what Alexander was doing here with his hands while working on this pupil was definitely more than just helping him to inhibit the misdirection of his manner of use and instructing him in how to maintain an improved direction of his neck-head-torso-limb relationship “in reaction to the stimulus of living.”⁵ He was clearly simultaneously using his hands to alter Mr. B’s conditions of use—“a lowering of the standard of muscle tension throughout the organism generally”—by gradually redistributing the more or less chronic tightnesses involved in both the specific spasm and in Mr. B’s overall musculature. If the film of Alexander working on people is an example of what he did with most of his students and trainees—and I take it that it is—it is easy to see that he is using his hands constantly to build up or add to the reorganization of the overall conditions of both of the people he is shown working on. You don’t see him instructing them verbally or speaking to them in any way at all; but presumably, by then, those particular people (one of whom is Margaret Goldie, a long-time teacher) had enough verbal instruction in inhibiting and in directing their manner of use not to need much more from Alexander than the work from his hands on their conditions of use as they did their best to maintain a good manner of use as a collaborating factor.⁶

I think the best example of change in a person’s conditions of use to be found in the Alexander literature is Lulie Westfeldt’s dramatic description of what happened to her during Alexander’s first teacher training course in the 1930s:

The high point in the training course for me was the change in my own individual condition . . . I remember a cold spring morning in my rooms on Cromwell Road. My breakfast tray had just come up, and I was in my dressing gown and bedroom slippers, walking across the room to the table where the tray had been placed. Suddenly I felt a

very strange sensation, not pleasant or unpleasant, but overwhelmingly strange. For a moment, I did not know what had happened. Then I realized that my right heel was touching the floor. It was no longer up in the air but flat on the floor like the left one. It had not touched the floor for upwards of twenty years; shortly after the operation [at age 13] that had immobilized the right ankle, my right heel had drawn up and been unable to touch the floor. The sensation became more and more delightful. Almost at once, my balance became much more secure.⁷

Clearly, Ms Westfeldt's drawn-up heel was not something that she had merely been subconsciously *doing* as part of her habitual manner of use that she then simply realized she could stop doing at that particular instant. It was obviously a long-established condition of chronic tightness over which she had no direct control—resulting, as she said, from the surgery performed on her ankle during her youth in an attempt to help her cope with the effects of polio. This release of the tightness surely was due to the gradual build-up of the year's nearly daily work from Alexander's skilled hands in conjunction with her own conscious work on improving her manner and conditions of use both in the training course and in her everyday life.

Traditional understandings of conditions of use

When I was training, the expression “conditions of use” (usually shortened to “conditions”) was used by our teachers mainly for discussing a trainee's particular level of development—though not usually in his or her presence, presumably because it might prompt the trainee to try to change the conditions directly by trying to manipulate any of the aspects in question. You might hear a teacher say, “Oh, she has very poor conditions; but she does understand how to inhibit and direct fairly well.” Or you might hear the converse: “His conditions have improved, even though he still can't seem to inhibit his habitual responses very well.” But it was generally conceded by all the teachers there that good conditions of use were both a major goal and a necessity for everyone in training, no matter how “normal” they seemed on entering the course. As training progressed, it became ever clearer that without good conditions of use, an improved manner of use alone wouldn't be sufficient for managing a full teaching load—that is, the kind of teaching that includes working toward improving both a pupil's manner of use and his or her conditions of use with the view of achieving an “integrated (normal) working of the postural mechanisms,” which Alexander described as a main purpose of employing inhibition and a conscious direction of the primary control in reaction to the stimulus of living.⁸

Of course, a main feature of conditions of use—maybe even more so than with the tensions and collapsings we make in our habitual manner of use—is that we don't usually, and often can't, feel our poor conditions of use in the early stages of learning and training in the Technique because of our faulty sensory appreciation. Many of our ingrained tightnesses and flaccidities have often existed in us for so long that, if perceived at all, they “feel right and natural,” to use Alexander's oft-repeated phrase. Sometimes they can also harbor elements of strong emotion and attitudes, and we usually don't even begin to understand how deeply seated these conditions have been until they actually begin to change. Until then, it is easy to think that no particular improvement needs to happen other than in our manner of use. Accordingly, it is unlikely that, as teachers, we can assess what changes in conditions need to happen in our pupils and trainees or understand how to direct them with our hands toward those changes unless we've experienced enough improvement in our own conditions of use to know what we're looking for in those we work on. Being able to introduce people to the concepts of the Technique is one thing; but knowing what is required for taking them toward an “integrated (normal) working of the postural mechanisms” is quite another. It is worth quoting here what Alexander writes about “conditions” in Chapter V, “Diagnosis and Medical Training” of *The Use of the Self*:

When [man's] sensory appreciation is untrustworthy, it is possible for him to become so familiar with **seriously harmful conditions of misuse of himself** that these **malconditions** will feel right and comfortable.

My teaching experience has shewn me that the worse these **conditions** are in a pupil and the longer they have been in existence, the more familiar and right they feel to him and the harder it is to teach him how to overcome them, no matter how much he may wish to do so. In other words, his ability to learn a new and more satisfactory use of himself is, as a rule, **in inverse ratio to the degree of misuse present in his organism and the duration of these harmful conditions**.

This point must be understood and taken into practical consideration by anyone forming a plan of procedure for improving the use and functioning of the mechanisms throughout the organism as a means of eradicating defects, peculiarities and bad habits.⁹ [Emphasis added]

Short-term conditions of use

Another aspect of conditions of use is what we might call “short-term tightnesses,” which can result from the more recent stress of a demanding activity, injury, emotional trauma, or illness. For example, I have had pupils who are string players in the Boston Symphony Orchestra and had Alexander lessons for many years. They worked long and hard at applying the principles of the Technique to

improving their manner of use, particularly while performing, and they succeeded very well in doing so; but the very heavy demand of their rehearsal and concert schedules could often cause tightnesses to build up that they couldn't always fully reorganize back into a more balanced lengthening and widening. Although they had also learned how to work on themselves in order to do this reorganizing on their own, they still found that having hands-on work from me (I don't really consider it giving them "lessons") often helped change their conditions more quickly so that they could get back on track with their manner of use much sooner so that they could be in top form for an important or demanding rehearsal or performance.

Another example that shows the effect of the Technique on short-term conditions of use is of a woman with a diagnosis of relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis with whom I worked over a number of years—before, during, and after she was undergoing Alexander teacher training. The most striking thing about her early lessons was the condition of weakness and limpness I would find in her musculature during the times she valiantly came to a lesson in the midst of a flare-up of the illness. Her walking would be slow and heavy, her balance uncertain, and her usual bright demeanor considerably dampened. But after an hour of hands-on work—predominantly table work—a lively tonus would return to her supportive musculature, and by the time she left, she would seem fully functioning again. After several years of Alexander work, her symptoms were reduced so much that her doctors began to think that maybe she had not had MS after all. Of course, they dismissed her attempts to explain that she had been studying the Technique so intensively over the years—with, I should add, a diligence and determination that can only be marvelled at.

A third example of changing short-term conditions is that of a musician who had taken a regular course of lessons with me and was especially successful in applying the principles of the Technique to her instrument. A few years after she had stopped having lessons, she phoned me one day to say that she had just been released from the hospital after a long recovery from a serious hit-and-run car accident as a pedestrian that had broken several of her ribs and both shoulder blades. However, on being dismissed from her doctor's care, she felt nowhere near being able to resume playing her instrument comfortably again, and, instead of the normally prescribed physical therapy, she persuaded him to allow her to have Alexander work instead to see if it would help her more quickly to get back on track for an important recital she had coming up. When she arrived at my studio, she was extremely rigid in nearly every joint, and it was very hard for her to move with ease in any direction or to be comfortable in any position. As I began to work with her with my hands I found her musculature was so stiff and

distorted that I thought it would probably take a number of sessions of Alexander work to bring her into a balanced enough state for her to resume playing her instrument fully and freely again. However, we were both quite astonished to find that in just an hour we were able to reorganize many of those tightnesses into enough lengthening and widening for her to be in a near-normal state again by the time she left. It also seemed clear to both of us that this striking improvement in her conditions happened so quickly because she had already learned so well in her previous lessons how to inhibit and direct her manner of use of herself in order to collaborate quite positively with the reorganizing direction that I was giving her with my hands.

It is also important to add here that, in the last two examples, I don't believe that I could have helped these pupils improve so quickly and effectively if I had only been using my hands to instruct them in improving their manner of use. My training to address both manner and conditions of use at the same time was definitely the determining factor in each instance. Furthermore, it is worth stating that even many experienced teachers choose to receive hands-on work from colleagues from time to time—particularly if they have had an injury or incapacitating illness. During my years of training, I recall that Walter Carrington would convene with senior teacher Peggy Williams during the last half hour of our lunch break and exchange hands-on work. And, after my training during the nearly twenty years that I knew senior Alexander teacher Kitty Wielopolska, we often arranged to spend holiday time together giving each other hands-on work—sometimes even twice a day because we found it so helpful. But we never considered it to be “giving each other lessons” in manner of use. We would just call it “doing some work.”

A personal experience of a change in my manner of use

In teaching, I have often explained for pupils the difference between manner of use and conditions of use by telling them about two major experiences of my own. One happened to me after I had had lessons for two summers, and the other came midway through my teacher training. I give a detailed description of the first in my article “Reconsidering ‘Forward and Up,’”¹⁰ where I tell about discovering during U.S. Army Basic Training how to maintain my primary directions while having to do the “low crawl,” which is a way of propelling yourself along the ground on your stomach with your elbows and your knees. I found low crawling impossibly difficult and exhausting at first, but I soon discovered that if I practised it very slowly I could direct my neck-head-torso-limb relationship to govern the integration of my manner

of use from moment to moment, instead of making the excessive tensions in my neck and torso that I automatically made when we were ordered to do it very fast. Eventually I was able to low crawl fast enough in this improved way to pass the final P.T. test easily—much to my amazement, since I had never been very good at activities that required a lot of athletic strength in arms and legs like the low crawl seemed to do at first. It was definitely an issue of *how* I was using myself from moment to moment: my manner of use.

A personal experience of a change in my conditions of use

This particular experience of a change in my conditions of use was perhaps more astonishing to me than any of the changes I experienced in my manner of use—especially because it happened to me so unexpectedly and because it ultimately proved to be connected to a very strong irrational fear of certain kinds of birds (chickens, pigeons, birds of prey, etc.) that I'd had since adolescence. By the time I began my Alexander training, however, I had come to accept that I would probably have to contend with this phobia for the rest of my life. I had developed ways of avoiding the places and situations that might trigger the usual panic, and I had just decided to leave it be—even though I had a vague idea then that psychoanalysis or psychiatry may have had ways of addressing it.

But one day during my second year of the training class while I was standing at the back of the room quietly directing myself without anyone working on me, I suddenly felt a deep release in my chest in the region just behind my breastbone—similar to the change described above when Lulie Westfeldt felt her heel suddenly touch the floor after so many years of its being chronically raised up. However, this tightness in my chest had not been something that I had any perception of at all—because, as I later realized, it been lodged there for at least fifteen years and had become “a part of me.” It wasn't a tension that I was “holding” that I could merely “let go of.”

Of course, with this release of tightness in my chest I immediately experienced a greater freedom in my breathing and a subtle sense of improved well-being. However, I didn't go through any kind of emotional catharsis like others sometimes did with such unexpected changes or like you read that people frequently undergo with therapies such as practiced by Wilhelm Reich, Ida Rolf, and others. Meanwhile, over the next few days, I was able to go on incorporating this greater chest freedom into the general lengthening and widening of my overall manner of use—both in the training class and elsewhere—and it seemed like the change was well on its way to becoming permanent.

On the following weekend, however, I decided to go to a nearby park to sit in the sun and read. And while I was sitting there, two pigeons suddenly flew down under my bench to peck at some crumbs scattered near my feet. Normally I would have immediately become uncomfortable and would have gotten right up to find another place to sit. But this time the instant panic reaction hadn't happened at all. As I went on reading for a while, though, I began to notice that I was subtly starting to tense my chest in a way that was obviously a precursor to the old condition of tightness that had been so chronically lodged there just behind my breastbone. Luckily, I caught the tensing response soon enough to be able to inhibit and redirect it back into the improved lengthening and widening and freer flow of breathing that I'd been able to incorporate into my general manner of use over the previous days, and I could go on sitting there watching the birds without much bother—even enjoying their markings and movements.

From that day on, the phobia's power over me grew less and less. What's more, I soon found out that the chest tightness had not only harbored that particular fear of birds, but it also included many other fears and subtle anxieties as well—ones that were surely all part of the general condition of use that Alexander called “unduly excited fear reflexes.”¹¹ For instance, I noticed that I would start to make the same contraction pattern in my chest when I was approaching a stranger alone at night on a dark street, or when I was walking out on stage to play a solo concert. (Much later, I did figure out what might be called the “psychological” origin of the specific bird phobia, but I seriously doubt that this insight alone—or any amount of talking about the problem, or any drug—could have brought about the release in my chest or yielded as much improvement in my ability to manage the larger, more general complex of fear responses that were at the root of the tightness at that time.)

It is also important to point out that this particular “release” of chest tightness was probably only able to happen as part of the general improvement in my overall conditions and manner of use of myself in my daily life from moment to moment. The release did not just “change into no tension”—which would have been a mere “collapse”—but actually transformed into a lengthening of the muscle fibers to become a part of my overall going up and lengthening and widening direction. That slow, general improvement in my overall conditions of use also provided me with the safe and confident feeling that any kind of release or muscular change would be OK, if not actually welcomed. I could also well imagine it being a very traumatic experience to have had that particular area of chest tension manipulated by someone who might have approached it with a localized and invasive pressure and whose only goal was to achieve “a local release” to “cure” me of my fears.

Teaching and training

As the Alexander Technique becomes more widespread and as attempts to teach it in groups have become common in certain quarters—both for introductory demonstrations and for extended instruction—we seem to get further and further away from appreciating the full potential of the Technique to alter a person's conditions of use. I think this is mainly because there simply is not enough time in such group work—even for a very skilled teacher—to deal with more than instruction in an improved manner of use. Working effectively enough on a person's conditions of use to bring about the kind of deep and lasting changes Alexander describes in his books takes close individual attention over an extended period of time, not just an intermittent putting-on of hands for a few minutes over an hour or two of instruction in manner of use. This duration-of-contact factor is also, of course, one of the main reasons for giving individual lessons, as well as a primary reason for having a fairly small teacher-to-trainee ratio in a training course. Even a five-to-one ratio can be stretching it, depending on the experience and skill of the teacher(s).

This is not necessarily to say that there's anything wrong with primarily focusing on teaching people an improved manner of use—particularly if they are informed that this is only what is being offered. For instance, cellist and Alexander teacher Vivien Mackie, who specializes in group work with musicians, teaches an improved manner of use beautifully in her classes, but she has also made it clear to those who attend that they should have extensive private work on both their conditions and manner of use in order to experience the full benefit of the Technique and to best incorporate the insights about manner of use that she communicates to them so well while they are at their instruments. (I have assisted Mrs. Mackie a number of times in these classes, working in the background on the conditions of use of the participants—mainly through traditional chair work, with very little opportunity for verbal communication—as they watch her address the manner of use of the person performing, and that has proven to be quite effective for many, especially if they already had regular private lessons with me.)

The American dilemma

With these distinctions in mind, it is evident that several first-generation teachers from the United States chose to focus almost exclusively on manner of use for purposes of group teaching or for the sake of giving a more educational impression of the Technique to the academic and scientific communities. If they had only been clearer with their pupils that they were doing so, it might be easier for us in the United States today to examine

teaching and training differences more objectively so that we could present a concise national standard to the public and authorities. What was seen by many as teaching innovation was really only a shift away from the total Technique to a focus on a part (or parts) of it. As a case in point, I cite one instance from the early 1970s when I asked one of these senior teachers what she did if she had someone come to her classes who had back trouble. She responded, “Send them to the chiropractor.” This was astonishing to me at the time, and it seemed even more unfortunate as I began to have more pupils come to me for lessons with back trouble who had formerly relied on chiropractic adjustments to help them cope with it. After having a number of Alexander lessons that helped them enormously with their back trouble, and after learning how to work on themselves (particularly by directing while lying on a floor), they often came to the conclusion that chiropractic was no longer an alternative for them and that they couldn't imagine returning to it again for help because of its invasive, endgaining approach. More recently, the research study published by the *British Medical Journal* on the benefits of Alexander lessons for dealing with back pain¹² also makes this senior teacher's statement seem even more unfortunate. In the same conversation, I also asked this teacher if she still did chair work with pupils, and her response was, “That's the quickest way to make someone stiff that I know of.” I wanted to say that it didn't necessarily have to be, but she obviously didn't want to discuss the subject any further.

The contrast seen by some between application work and chair and table work has also fostered a misunderstanding of the fundamental experience to be gained from traditional teaching through chair work. Some have said that they did not learn how to apply the principles of the Technique to their daily lives through having chair and table work alone and that they only began to understand how to use themselves better on their own when they experienced application work—which, when I have observed it, mainly focuses on having the pupil choose and execute various actions with the teacher's hands-on guidance. Of course, at first glance, it is easy for some to interpret chair work as having only to do the with the motion of getting in and out of chairs and not to grasp that the use of the sitting to standing and standing to sitting action is merely a paradigm for representing how we deal with every situation and movement in our lives. No one I have known who learned the Technique primarily through having chair and table work ever felt that they were not learning at every lesson how to approach dealing with every single action and reaction through applying the principles of inhibiting their habitual responses and directing an improved working of their primary control at what Alexander called the “critical moment”¹³ that comes just as one begins to

think of what one will do, or of what may be going to happen next in the immediate or more distant future.

Another example of the misunderstandings about teaching approaches comes from an experience I had observing a small class for pupils given in the early 1970s by another senior American teacher who had chosen to orient his teaching toward an exposition of manner of use so that he could present the Technique in a way that appeared predominantly educational rather than therapeutic. In order to promote this view, he had also abandoned traditional chair work and table work, and when one of his pupils in the class asked him what the expression “table work” meant, he said, “Come over to this [long classroom] table, and I’ll show you.” He had the pupil lie face-up on the table, and he proceeded to go around to his head, arms, and legs and give them a cursory sort of joggling with his hands that was nothing at all like the careful, non-endgaining manner of directing that we had been taught for giving table work during my training course in order to achieve an effective change in a pupil’s conditions of use. After a few minutes, the teacher had him get up from the table, and, looking quite disgruntled, the pupil said, “Ugh! I feel awful. Now I see why you don’t believe in doing table work with your pupils.”

The mistaken assumption by their pupils that these senior American teachers were developing “teaching innovations” has often resulted in pitting “advancement” against “convention.” As a result, the real crux of the differences in approach has been missed entirely by many, frequently leaving those differences to be explained away merely as a matter of “differences in individual styles.” But a full understanding of the distinction between conditions of use and manner of use, as well as an understanding of the skill required for bringing these two aspects toward an integrated (normal) working of the postural mechanisms in pupils and trainees, are actually the main factors that distinguish the fully trained teacher from the partially trained, the experienced from the inexperienced, and particularly the inexperienced from the fake—whether they are doing traditional table and chair work or application work.

One misleading feature of the power of the Technique is that sometimes the changes in manner of use experienced by pupils in just a few lessons or classes can be so astonishing that it is very easy for them to get the impression that there’s not much more to gain from studying the Technique than an improvement in manner of use—particularly if their conditions of use happen to be especially good to begin with. For example, before I did my teacher training I had lessons for four years (nearly daily for two summers with Joan Murray, and additional lessons off and on with her, Walter Carrington, Frank Jones, and Rika Cohen), and these first lessons had

such a profound effect on my life and on my work as a musician that I even thought I might be able to complete the training in less time than others. But those early changes were actually very minor in comparison to the ones brought about in both my manner and conditions of use by the daily, three-hour individual work in class over the full three years of training. I still needed every moment of work in class that I could get for those deeper changes to happen, and I don’t believe they could have occurred if I had been holding down a regular job and/or had only been training on weekends—as has been more recently proposed as a training possibility for people who are employed full-time otherwise. These changes in my conditions of use required a steady, unimpeded, and nearly daily continuity. (That fact was further validated for me in working with my own trainees during the ten years I ran a training course.)

Implications for unity and self-regulation

I think the lack of understanding that conditions of use are a central element in the traditional teaching of the Technique may be behind the idea that training can be effectively done in less than the standard, full-time, three-year period, or that it can be done on a series of intensive weekends. If an improved manner of use were all that is necessary to teach and learn, maybe a shorter or a weekend training could be enough. But, of course, even if teachers choose to confine themselves to teaching manner of use, it would still be preferable for them to have done the full training so that they could be as effective as possible. (This view is reinforced in the published collection of interviews with some of the first-generation teachers called *Taking Time*.¹⁴)

I would like to emphasize here that I don’t mean to be claiming that pupils should only have private lessons and that group work doesn’t have its place. I feel that group work can be extremely valuable too—especially if pupils have had a good introduction and exposure to the Technique through private lessons. I have certainly given group work to my own pupils from time to time over the forty-some years that I have taught, often in collaboration with other teachers, and it has been obvious that it is very valuable for the pupils to experience being worked on in a social setting where they are more likely to have to contend with their habitual reactions than in a one-to-one situation. Listening to and participating in discussions about aspects of the Technique can also be very enlightening for them at the various stages of their learning and understanding.

Nor do I necessarily object to application work per se. It can, of course, be quite useful to have a skilled teacher work with you as you undertake various tasks, particularly

those that demand a highly refined coordination such as is involved in playing a musical instrument. Right from the beginning of my Alexander study I had many very important experiences while teachers worked with me while I was engaged in playing my instrument. And, since I have specialized in teaching the Technique to musicians, I have spent countless hours working with them on every aspect of their playing and singing—sometimes even helping those who had to stop playing entirely due to “overuse” injuries such as tendonitis, focal dystonia, thoracic outlet syndrome, etc. But I would never entertain the idea that application work alone—whether given in groups or privately—is sufficient for anyone to gain a full grasp of what the Technique can entail in terms of improving both manner and conditions of use, particularly for those who come to it seeking help with seriously debilitating problems. I think that most of the traditionally trained Alexander teachers I know feel the same.

To resolve the dilemma that we—in many ways unwittingly—seem to be in because of these oversights and misunderstandings, maybe we should have different classifications of Alexander training similar to the different classifications in the broad spectrum of medical training: “specialists, general practitioners, nurse practitioners, regular nurses, paramedics, nurses’ aides,” etc. Nurses’ aides do their part in helping people toward recovery and good health and sometimes may even save people’s lives, as surgeons, general practitioners, and nurses, each in their own way, also may; but no patient expects a nurses’ aide to be able to perform, say, brain surgery.

Likewise, there are many thoughtful and well-meaning people at all levels of Alexander experience who can and do successfully communicate various aspects of the Technique to others—as I even did sometimes with good results to some friends in my Army unit before I entered the three-year teacher training course. But no matter how effectively a particular person might be able to convey some aspects of the technique to others, surely the public deserves to be presented with a clear distinction between such partial versions and the work being offered by those teachers who have the skill to impart the complete Technique as Alexander presented it in his writings and as it has been perpetuated by the majority of teachers he trained. Such a categorizing of teaching would undoubtedly be hard to develop and carry out, and it could also ultimately be seen by some as a form of discrimination. In the long run, however, it might be the only honest and effective path toward professional unity and voluntary self-regulation wherever such diverse orientations to teaching and training have been established by those who claim to be able to teach and to train others to teach but have not gone through a training course themselves or have only completed a partial

training, in contrast to those places where training courses have adhered to the original training standards that Alexander formally established in 1930 by announcing in his “Open Letter to Intending Students ...” that he was offering a full-time training course for students aspiring to become professional teachers of his Technique.¹⁵

Ultimately, all these elements and distinctions probably depend upon the establishment of a clear definition and description of Alexander’s unique discovery of how to use the hands (beyond a mere “light hand contact that is used to accompany verbal instruction”) to facilitate changes in a person’s conditions and manner of use. And that definition and description should particularly serve to distinguish our way of using our hands from other modes of manual contact and instruction that claim to facilitate changes in a person’s musculature such as physiotherapy, the various types of massage, Craniosacral therapy, etc. Until this clarification is made, training requirements can only be put forth as a matter of the superficial elements involved: number of class hours, teacher-to-trainee ratio, etc. An insistence on viewing the Alexander Technique as only an educational method that deals with manner of use severely hinders the understanding of what it is comprised of in the eyes of the general public, government authorities, and the medical, scientific and educational communities. Finally, perhaps we must admit to ourselves and openly state that it is, and generally has been for over a hundred years, simultaneously both educational and therapeutic in nature.

I hope these observations and comments will be helpful to everyone concerned with the future of the Alexander Technique in North America and worldwide.

Acknowledgements

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Notes/References

Note: Dates of original publication are given in square brackets. Page references are to the editions cited.

- ¹ F. Matthias Alexander, *The Use of the Self* ([1932] London: Victor Gollancz, 1985), p. 39.
- ² *The Use of the Self*, p. 57.
- ³ *The Use of the Self*, p. 80.
- ⁴ F. Matthias Alexander, *The Universal Constant in Living* ([1941] London: Mouritz, 2000), pp. 16–22.
- ⁵ *The Universal Constant in Living*, p. xxvii.
- ⁶ A short film clip narrated by Walter Carrington of Alexander giving chair work to Margaret Goldie can be seen at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bbeXjewVmME> accessed 22-Mar-2015. Fuller versions and additional clips can be viewed in the DVD *F. M. Alexander 1949-1950* (London: Mouritz, DVD 978-0952557432).
- ⁷ Lulie Westfeldt, *F. Matthias Alexander: The Man and His Work* ([1964] London: Mouritz, 1998), pp. 86–87.
- ⁸ *The Universal Constant in Living*, pp. 107–110.
- ⁹ *The Use of the Self*, p. 82.
- ¹⁰ Joe Armstrong, “Reconsidering ‘Forward and Up’” (London: Statnews, 2001); viewable at <http://www.joearmstrong.info/FWDANDUP3rtf1.htm> accessed 22-Mar-2015.
- ¹¹ F. Matthias Alexander, *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* ([1923] London: Mouritz, 2000), 134ff.
- ¹² Paul Little, George Lewith et al., “Randomised controlled trial of Alexander technique lessons, exercise, and massage (ATEAM) for chronic and recurrent back pain”, *British Medical Journal*, 2008;337:a884.; viewable at <http://www.bmj.com/content/337/bmj.a884> accessed 22-Mar-2015.
- ¹³ *The Use of the Self*, p. 45.
- ¹⁴ *Taking Time: Six Interviews with First Generation Teachers of the Alexander Technique on Alexander Teacher Training* conducted by Crissman Taylor and Carmen Tarnowski, ed. Chariclia Gounaris (Aarhus: Novis, 2000–www.novis.dk).
- ¹⁵ “Open letter to intending students of training course”, reproduced in the Appendix to *The Use of the Self*, pp. 112-118.