

Research Milestone!

John H. M. Austin's study demonstrates improvements in functioning

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Editor's Notes

This piece captures an interesting point in the development of research related to the Alexander Technique, bringing into view the dedication needed by those involved in order to meet the methodological requirements of peer-reviewed journals.

In her introduction to this section of *Alexander Revisited*, Phyllis Richmond notes "These little pieces intended for the Alexander novice have lasting value, not only as precursors to his better known writing, but especially for the polished miniatures they are in themselves".

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In a memo dated November 4, 1991, John H. M. Austin, M.D., of New York, informed members of the Alexander community that his research on respiratory function and the Alexander Technique had been accepted for publication in a medical journal. Dr Austin's study, co-authored by Alexander teacher Pearl Ausubel, is the very first to demonstrate, under conditions of accepted scientific rigor, improvement in physical functioning as a result of Alexander lessons. As such, it truly is a milestone¹.

It was a dozen long years ago that the results of Dr Austin's first pilot study were reported in the premier issue of *The Alexandrian*, this country's first Alexander periodical, edited by me and published by the American Center for the Alexander Technique. Having known and worked closely with John these many years, I want to take this opportunity to introduce both him and his work to my readers.

But first, as they say, a brief historical note. Numerous respectable studies of various biomechanical,

psychological, and behavioral aspects of the Technique began to be published around 1960, notably by Dr Wilfred Barlow and Frank Pierce Jones. As early as 1938, however, a cogent monograph by Alma Frank, one of the first American teachers, had appeared in the journal of the Society for Research in Child Development. Beginning in the mid-70's, several academic theses and dissertations investigated the Technique, mostly in terms of music and music education. In a psychology dissertation, however, at Tufts University, to that point the most rigorous study in terms of design, Richard Brown demonstrated a significant relationship between Alexander experience and positive cognitive and emotional states.

A further word about this matter of rigor: it is the issue of control that is central to the evaluation of research. To permit the inference that a result is valid, and thus generalizable, it is not sufficient to show that a particular treatment produces a change, regardless of magnitude. Rather, change in one group must be assessed relative to an equivalent group—called a control—which

receives no treatment or an alternative treatment. The role of statistics in research is thus not to show if change has taken place—that is the role of measurement—but rather whether the degree of any measured change is statistically significant, i.e., whether it is truly the result of the application of an experimental procedure or merely due to chance. It is certainly true that there are other methods of conducting valid research, but this paradigm of the statistically-analyzed controlled experiment remains the accepted standard for publishable research in the sciences generally, including medicine and psychology.

John himself, now Professor of Clinical Radiology specializing in pulmonary function at the prestigious Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center in New York, came to the Technique from his musical rather than his medical background. An excellent violinist and string bassist, he began Alexander study with Pearl Ausubel in the late 70's to deal with performance tensions. He became interested in experimental validation of the Technique, using his speciality of lung function as a point of departure for research design. The reputation of the Technique in improving breathing inspired, so to speak, the major line of attack. Access to spirometry, a procedure that measures respiratory function, and other facilities of the laboratory at Columbia-Presbyterian, provided the necessary basis for quantifying experimental change.

In early 1980 John approached the American Center, where I was at the time in charge of such matters, for help in getting subjects for his study. Thanks to the Center's network of teachers, eight subjects were recruited and tested, both before and after a series of 20 lessons, yielding results of significant improvement in several aspects of respiratory function. Over the next couple of years John submitted an article reporting these findings to journals in the field, all of which declined to publish it, citing the small number of subjects and the lack of controls.

Somewhere along the line, excited by John's results in the pilot study, I got the idea of finishing my long-in-limbo doctoral degree by doing a similar study with wind players. Encouraged by Dr Harold Abeles, of the music department at Teachers College-Columbia University, I enlisted John for my dissertation committee. He was a "natural" given his professorship within the Columbia system and his willingness to lend full moral and technical support to the project. Over many a late dinner in our neighborhood Szechuan restaurant we worked hard on the study's design, which became the first to use a control group in investigating the Technique relative to improvement in physical functioning. To make a long story short, the project was duly carried out with seven experimental subjects and six controls. Unfortunately, there was no significant improvement in my experimental

group, which did not prevent my getting the degree in 1987 but was certainly a considerable blow to my pride. In accounting for these results, John and I eventually speculated that wind players, being already strongly-habituated "respiratory athletes," probably would not show much change during a relatively small duration of Alexander study.

Genuinely attesting John's faith in the Technique's ultimate validation by experimental methods is the fact that, in the teeth of my disappointing results, and despite formidable logistical problems, he determined to repeat his study, this time with a target of 20 experimental subjects and an appropriate control group! In the smallest of nutshells, this quest that had become ever more frustrating and seemingly endless, eventually reached completion with the happy outcome announced at the beginning of this article. In John's own words: "I am delighted to report that after a long haul of data analysis, a million rewrites, and difficulties with disbelieving medical editors, our research has finally been accepted for publication in the respected mainstream medical journal *Chest*." BRAVO, JOHN!

Notes/References

- ¹ J. H. Austin and P. Ausubel, 'Enhanced respiratory muscular function in normal adults after lessons in proprioceptive musculoskeletal education without exercises', *Chest*. 1992;102(2):486-490, doi:10.1378/chest.102.2.486

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