



LEARNING HOW TO LEARN

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ANNUAL MEMORIAL LECTURE,
9 OCTOBER 2021

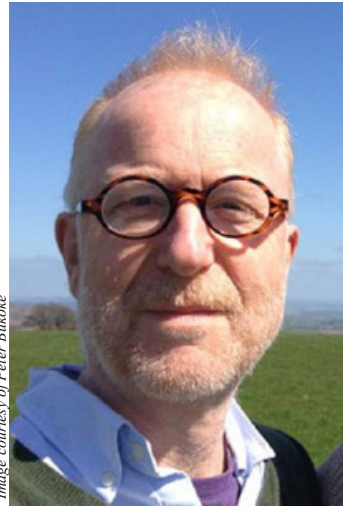


Image courtesy of Peter Buckoke

PETER BUCKOKE  

Citation: Buckoke, P. Learning How to Learn. *The Alexander Journal*. 2024, 29, 110-120

DOI: 10.15763/issn.2998-3509.2024.29.110-120



Abstract

This is a transcript of the 2021 Memorial Lecture of the Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique (STAT). The original lecture was presented as a video online. The lecture included excerpts from other video interviews and performances which have not been transcribed. Links to these videos have been included as footnotes in the text. The original presentation can be accessed in full by following the link in the end notes.

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In June 1973 Frank Pierce Jones gave a talk at CTC in London which was titled “Learning How to Learn”. I am going to take advantage of the transcript of that talk and I would like to start by reading some of it to you now. He includes his own quote from Marjorie Barstow.

Learning how to learn is what distinguishes the Alexander Technique from all other ways to grow. Thinking, directing, giving orders, or however you wish to describe it, is not an end in itself. It has value and meaning only as it is applied to the pupil's own

life. As Marjorie Barstow put it “giving orders is a procedure that turns into activity, not into fixtures; the teacher is only a guide to help the student learn to think and do for himself; it is the teacher’s job to help the student carry on into daily activities” (Frank Pierce Jones 1973)

As I was preparing for this lecture I have been thinking about learning and the twin topic of teaching. Which seems appropriate as we are all Alexander teachers. I don’t think a teacher can make a student learn anything, as teachers we can facilitate learning. I believe everything we do as Alexander teachers facilitates learning, that is what the Technique is for me.

The education environment seems like the perfect place for giving Alexander lessons but before the education environment we learn a lot. As babies and children, we learn easily and quickly. We are being nurtured, stimulated and supported by our close family. No formal instruction is involved as we learn.

During those first five years we learn more than any other five years of our life. At around the age of five, in Britain, children are expected to go to school, this begs the question, “does being at school slow the learning process?”

Over the last 35 years I have noticed that teaching musicians the Alexander principles speeds up the learning process, maybe to the speed it was up to five years old. Surely the Alexander Technique should be included in the national curriculum or at least in the training of school-teachers.

John Dewey, who met F.M. during the first half of the twentieth century, had Alexander lessons and was very impressed by its appropriateness for the teaching environment. He did his best to incorporate Alexander into the national curriculum in America. He didn’t get as far as he would have liked to but, here in London we do have a fine example of a school that uses the Alexander



Image courtesy of Peter Bukoko

A still image from the video about Educare Small School and Alexander work, with Elizabeth Steinthal.

Technique on a daily basis: Educare Small School in Kingston. Sue Merry teaches primary school children using age-appropriate language and activities.

I would like to play a short video where Small School headmistress Liz Steinthal talks to Sue Merry. You will hear Liz refer to the Ready List, that is something I would like to go into a little more deeply later in my talk.

I would like to consider the influence of the interest of the student on the learning process. Learning is fluent when we are interested in anything. We don’t have to try to learn, it just happens. All new concepts and skills are potentially interesting to anybody, but we have to realise they are interesting and then we learn them automatically. A teacher can help you realise a concept is interesting by using appropriate language and activities for you in the class. The teacher’s enthusiasm makes a big difference, it influences the student’s learning process. If we make our subject sound difficult or dull we will certainly find our students don’t learn so well or so quickly.

Interestingly, Michel Thomas, a language teacher who taught several languages very successfully gave advice at the beginning of every recorded language course, (I paraphrase) ‘Don’t try to

remember anything’, ‘don’t worry about mistakes’, ‘find a way to be comfortable and truly present, so you can fully engage with the group that is learning with you and be positively interactive in this lesson.’ This seems like really good advice.

Let’s consider our lessons.

Do we help our pupils to be comfortable? Yes, I think we are all doing that.

Do we help our students let go of worry around mistakes? Are we positively interactive with our students? All of these things help the learning process.

Now let us consider: Do we emphasise mistakes and do we talk about correcting our students? Or, do we connect with our students and reveal the next learning step?

Let’s return to the School Idea. What happens when you go to school?

A good learning environment in the school is where students feel: happy, respected, included, stimulated, supported and given the psycho-physical space needed for learning. Just like any work environment all these conditions make a positive difference.

John Dewey, the American philosopher and educationalist gave us a really good quote. It is written at the beginning of *The Use of the Self*. ‘The Alexander Technique bears the same relation to education that education bears to all other human activity.’ It is absolutely clear that John Dewey didn’t see the Alexander Technique as an end in itself. (Alexander 1932, 7)

Let’s consider what gets in the way of learning.

Discomfort gets in the way of learning. Rigid school discipline, poor chairs and incorrectly-sized equipment all affect our comfort. We are very lucky that Rick Brennan has done his wonderful chair campaign and some very positive results have been found from using chairs that fit the students - it is a good idea.

What else gets in the way of learning?

If a student is in slow onset startle pattern, things will not be working so well.

Mind wandering can lead to creative new pathways but young people often don’t notice that their mind is wandering when it would be better off being present and in the room. Maybe their phone takes them off somewhere on a magical mystery tour but often that takes them outside of the body.

Coming away from the phone it is easy to get stuck in memories. If we are thinking in the past or maybe worrying about the future that may be influencing our capacity to learn in the present. For sure there is an epidemic of mental health problems in university-age students at the moment. We are seeing that at the Royal College of Music.

All these things get in the way of the learning process. Our Alexander work can bring students back into their bodies and into the present where they can learn fluently.

At one of the international conferences, Elizabeth Walker, who trained with F.M., was asked ‘What is the most important thing in an Alexander lesson?’ Her answer was ‘The relationship between the teacher and the pupil.’ So, let’s think about that relationship.

Pupils learn most if they feel comfortable, interested, respected and supported. So that is where we can step in and help them feel comfortable, try to stimulate their interest, constantly respect and give them all the support they need.

I’m sure we all notice that we learn from our students - it is good for us to acknowledge that relationship in some way. And if we and our students are feeling good about this relationship all of us can look forward to the lessons.

Moving to the information that we bring to the lessons.

How important is the information that we bring to a lesson? Of course, it is fundamentally

important. It should honour the essential elements of the authentic Alexander Technique as we understand them.

So how can we help our students learn?

One thing is for sure, we are not obliged to teach in the way we were taught. After, what I realise was an excellent training with Eleanor and Peter Ribeaux, I spread my wings and had lessons with Walter Carrington, Patrick MacDonald and Marjorie Barstow and I found that everybody taught in their own particular way. But the essence of the teaching was the authentic Alexander Technique as they saw it.

What can we teach in the first lesson or the first few lessons?

Well certainly not the whole subject. This is a big challenge because there is a lot of stuff that we need to get across to our students. How do we pace that learning journey? It is worth bearing in mind that detailed knowledge that we might focus on makes sense within a broad perspective. Like in music; considering one note within a phrase or piece, if you take it out of the piece you can work on it, you can learn it but it only makes sense in the context of the whole piece.

A student can be overwhelmed if they think they are expected to learn the whole piece in the first few lessons - the best we can do is inspire their interest and whet their appetite for the process. How do we do that? Interactivity engages and develops interest - we learn easily when we are interested. So, let's be interactive.

We can ask and encourage questions. If we ask a question, a student has to reply. If they don't say anything it is a sort of reply. If we ask them to ask questions and they do, we hear where they have got to with their thinking. Activities in groups work very well and occasionally it is good to break that group into pairs so you can encourage the less confident students to open up and say what they are thinking.

I remember going to visit Walter Carrington's training school at Lansdowne Road. It was a wonderful morning and partway through the morning the door opened and in walked Walter Carrington. He gave a short lecture to us and then set up a game to play in pairs. It is a very good way to become interactive.

Something we do at the Royal College of Music is we encourage students to practice with a friend between the lessons so they can support each other on whatever they are trying to change - it increases that interactive learning.

Another way of being interactive is to bring your sense of humour to the lesson. If your students are laughing, they are interacting with you and they will learn faster. I remember, a long time ago, getting a chance to see Professor Arthur Hutchins give a talk about nineteenth century opera. He was very entertaining, in fact I was laughing from beginning to end.

As I was walking out of the lecture with a student from the university they asked me "what did you think of the professor?"

I replied "Well he's a great comedian, I'm not sure how much I learned about nineteenth century opera though."

The student said "Well, let's find out."

They asked me about twenty questions and of course I remembered what had been said. I had learned because I had been enjoying myself, I had been comfortable, I had been interactive, I had been laughing.

At the Royal College of Music the word has gone round that Alexander lessons are enjoyable as well as practically useful. It is very noticeable that the students who most enjoy the lessons progress very rapidly. We have noticed from year to year that our teaching gets better and better. It gets easier for us. We are thinking that the atmosphere around the Technique has become very positive, so the students talk to each other and when we get new students coming in for their first Alexander lessons they are already convinced that it is going to be good, even if they don't know



An image from James Douglas's video¹ about the Alexander principles

anything about it.

Now I would like to show you a short snippet of a video presentation made by an alumnus of the Royal College of Music, a viola player James Douglas. He has started making light-hearted but focused videos on the Alexander principles.

I will play about a minute's worth of his presentation on the primary control.

I hope you enjoyed James's presentation. You could see that humour was brought to the situation but that the basic idea was being explored. This sort of presentation connects with the 18- to 25-year-old age group. Video presentations are a teaching technique worth considering.

James was talking about the importance of the lengthening spine and we often manage to help a student let their spine lengthen during a lesson. This physical state helps them with their mind-body coordination.

Frank Pierce Jones talks about increasing the 'moving height' in activity. It takes the pressure off the nervous system. I like to explain that that is why the coordination improves; the pressure is taken off the nervous system as the spine lengthens, particularly the neck where there are so many nerves coming through.

Professor Ian Loram has done us a great service. He has done some research at Manchester Metropolitan University which has produced data that shows the general reduction of muscular effort when the spine lengthens. I'd like to read a little of the abstract from his work.

Analysis of ultrasound, kinematic, electromyographic and electrodermal recordings showed that proactive inhibition targeted at neck muscles had an indirect global effect reducing the cost of movement, reducing complex involuntary task-irrelevant movement patterns and improving balance. (Ian Loram 2017)

This work was done with violinists. I saw some of the recordings that were made and you can hear the difference when someone frees their neck. There is less tension, the whole body is more efficient and learning is more rapid.

Now I would like to turn our attention to habit in the learning process.

I think habit should have a very good reputation. Habits are fast and potentially very efficient. But *use* affects functioning so some habits will need changing. I like to point out that any skill is a collection of habits. It is something that goes on in the background, it goes on without us having to think about it. It comes from the subconscious brain. A musician's instrumental technique or a javelin thrower's throwing technique is basically a collection of habits.

If we think about a habit, it becomes influenced by that conscious thought. It is not the same anymore. The subconscious brain is brilliant at organising our mind-body coordination. It helps us act out our habits. The conscious brain is not brilliant at carrying out skilful tasks. It is, however, the only way to change our coordination. So we need the conscious brain to do the Alexander work that improves coordination. Constructive conscious control comes from the thinking brain

influencing the whole body's coordination. Once the new habit is in place it should go into the subconscious where it belongs and then it works highly efficiently, very quickly and is very reliable.

I'd like to have a look at learning how to perform.

We are very interested in this at the Royal College of Music. I think one of the messages is: we can think too much in performance. Brilliant performance is in the zone, it is in the flow state. If we are anxious, we think too much. If we start thinking how to play our instrument, our thinking is trying to take over with the coordination. Interactivity and spontaneity can be impaired by thinking too much, that does not sound like great performing. Many performers feel that they are letting go to get in the zone and something special happens. Letting go sounds like our work so



John Tognasaki, CC BY 2.0 license

A video of Roger Federer was played at this point in the presentation

we can help performers into the zone. To perform well maybe you should let go of thinking and rely on your technique. Allow yourself to be interactive and then you will be truly spontaneous.

I'd like to show you one of the great tennis players in action, Roger Federer. I'd also like you to consider how much he is thinking about tennis or how to play the shots when he is playing his rallies.

Highly skilled performance.

Highly skilled performers have done thousands of hours of constructive conscious work on technique and preparation. In performance, I think the mode changes. We can help our students to understand the difference between practice and performance. Learning can take place in both modes of course.

Performance mode is all about being present and interactive and in the flow. I can remember experiencing the flow when receiving hands-on work from Macdonald, Carrington and Ribeaux. I would feel and then think 'this is so fluent and easy; can it be like this for me all the time?' And that's the state I wanted to get into.

I would like to share a significant moment for me in my teaching.

I was teaching a group of musicians at the Royal College of Music and a cellist played to us. She was focused on her playing and it sounded very good. I asked her after she played 'What were you thinking while you were playing?' The answer that she gave took about three minutes. It was extraordinary how much she had been thinking about and it hit me that I had overburdened this cellist, this good cellist, with too much stuff to think about. I asked her to play again but this time to stop thinking and just play from her heart. It was more fluent, more communicative, we all liked it more and I realised my teaching had to change.

One of the things we do in lessons is break any skill into chunks. Ted Dimon writes beautifully about exploring the elements of skill. Once we have broken the skills into smaller elements,

we can explore the transitions from one element to the next and then we can move on to finding the whole and the flow state. The time for analysis and conscious control is maybe in the past.

I'd like to share a short clip of some musicians, a piano sextet by Mendelssohn being played by six very fine musicians. I'd like you to notice that some of them are more present, not thinking but being interactive and some of them are thinking about what they are playing and how they are doing it. I wonder if you will agree with me that there is a noticeable difference.

[A video clip of an orchestral performance of Mendelssohn Piano Sextet in D Major was played.]⁴

It is nice to hear some music from time to time isn't it?

The Alexander Technique is basically a framework for learning. We've got a very big message to get across: If you want to learn how to do something better, you have to do it differently. If you repeat what you just tried it implies that you're happy with the result you are getting. If you simply try again you probably won't learn anything. 'Recognition of habit' is an essential part of the process.

The primary control is where we start with our thinking. Inhibition of whatever we want to stop doing has to be brought to the party. The means whereby is where we change and direction speeds up the change and takes us to a deeper level of skill.

Alexander as we know is a skill for life. It is transferable to other activities. It can be used in every learning situation. It is hugely helpful to learn about faulty sensory perception. We are however aiming to develop accurate sensory perception and that is why Marjorie Barstow used to ask 'And how does that feel?' when things were going very well. It is good to bring attention to the sensory mechanism when things are going very well.

I'd like to show a short snippet of Lindsay Wagstaff teaching on the National Youth Choir Course.

[A video clip was played.]⁵

At the Royal College of Music we encourage students to video record their practice. When they see themselves, they can make a connection to the way they use their body when they are playing their instrument. Recognition of faulty sensory perception is easier with video evidence. We often hear in the class 'I had no idea I was doing that'. When a musician looks at a video of their playing, they can make the observation, 'when it looks like that, it sounds like that.' They see and understand what they are doing with their body that makes the sound.

Moving into the feeling or sensing mode we can notice, when it looks like that it sounds like that and then remember what that felt like. So 'when it sounds like that, I feel like this.' For musicians it is great to move away from listening into the kinaesthetic and touch senses. Feeling the vibrations of the instrument and the vibrations of the whole body is an ideal state. In this state you are listening with your whole body and this state tunes you into the zone for performing any activity.

Similar awareness works for other activities. I remember seeing someone nailing down floorboards. They had a few nails in their mouth, they would take one out then bang the hammer rhythmically on the nail and you heard the nail going into the wood. Now if you tune into sensing the movement of your body, the hammer hitting the nail, the feedback through your arm so you get the sense of the vibration and you hear the pitch of the vibration in the nail changing as it gets further and further into the wood - it is almost the same as playing a musical instrument. The kinaesthetic and touch senses are involved and they can tune you into most activities that you are learning.

It is worth thinking about what young people do today and how they learn in 2021. Young people use social media, YouTube and apps. If we look into those media, we can recommend where to find the Alexander material. There is a lot out there. I would like to mention the new

app created by Maaïke Aarts, it is called ‘Think Up!’

It is made to help students of the Alexander Technique keep going between lessons. Maaïke’s app is a collection of explanations and talk-throughs about applying the Technique to everyday life and developing skills. This is a valuable learning tool for the twenty-first century.

In the twentieth century, I remember Jeannie McClean saying ‘If they don’t learn the way you teach, you have to teach in the way they learn’. What a good message that is. Michel Thomas, the language teacher said, ‘There is no such thing as a bad student, only bad teaching.’

Language can be a barrier to learning. We sometimes teach people whose first or even second language is not English. There is no point in saying something brilliant to a student if they don’t understand your language. Using language appropriate for the student in the room comes back to Elisabeth Walker’s relationship between the teacher and the student.

I’d like to come back to the Ready List now.



Image courtesy of Peter Bukoke

Still from the Ready List video clip*

Sue Merry, Andy Smith, Judith Kleinman and I are developing a new way of starting pupils off on their learning journey.

Before you start doing something, improve your learning state by thinking:

Stop, See, Breathe, Soft and Tall. Then get on with the activity and you will learn more fluently. It is very simple and effective. After this start, it is easier to work well.

I’d like to show you one of the Educare students talking about The Ready List.

Thank you Nancy, that was delightful.

Now for a little more detail on the Ready List:

Stop: A moment to find grounding, rather than being in your head, becoming present in your whole body.

See: This connects you with the environment as well as your body. Frank Pierce Jones called this the expanded field of consciousness and it is what makes what John Dewey called “thinking in activity” possible.

Breathe: We all know that oxygen in the blood is what makes it possible to use the brain well both consciously and subconsciously and for muscles to work well.

Think soft and tall: Very simple initial directions.

Using this sort of language maybe feels like a bit of a compromise. Are we compromising the integrity of the work if we start off in this way? F.M. died sixty-six years ago and the use of language moves on. I am sure if Alexander was a hundred and fifty-two and still teaching, he would be using all sorts of words appropriate for the students. We can, at first, connect easily with our pupils by using simple and maybe less precise language. More complexity and precision can come later in the process. F.M. was good at changing. We are teaching how to change. Are we happy to change our teaching?

If the spoken language is a barrier to learning we’ve always got our hands, that is a serious

advantage. Learning takes place on a subtle level when hands are teaching. We can be alert to how our hands-on messages are received to make sure the right messages are getting through. We can add sound and words to the messages we are giving with our hands. We can build up a lexicon of useful words and aural stimuli for each student.

Age-appropriate language is always best, we can be flexible. Primary school kids may need different words to older students. Mature students learn fluently with simple language. All of us learn well when things are presented simply, especially at first.

At the Royal College of Music, the Alexander Technique is taught as an academic subject. Students write introductions, make video diaries, do research projects and make films. One assign-



A still from the video made by Davidona Pittoch

Image courtesy of Peter Bikoke

ment is to compare the psycho-physical information that is given on how to play their instrument in a treatise with what they have learned in their Alexander classes. Their submissions show us where they have got to in their understanding of the Technique. We become better teachers by reading and hearing their words.

I would like to show you a brief extract from a film made by a postgraduate singing student Davidona Pittoch.

It is good to look at successful teaching methods. At the Royal College of Music we look at a comparison between Timothy Gallwey's *The Inner Game* and the Alexander Principles. The inner game is a hugely successful global brand. Several million copies of his books have been sold. When we look into the inner game we find sensory awareness, avoiding end-gaining, relying on the subconscious to perform highly skilled activities, developing presence. He does not refer to the primary control, inhibition and direction, in the way we do and he does not use hands-on during the lessons. I think the success of the inner game comes down to the presentational style. The words used are quite simple and easy to connect with, so the ideas come across immediately right from the start of the lessons.

We are very fortunate to have a relatively new framework in the polyvagal theory.

We can look at threat vs safety. Or maybe we think of it as startle, anxiety, tension vs, release freedom and balance. So just in case anybody doesn't know the basics of polyvagal theory, there are three basic states of the autonomic nervous system: Dorsal vagal is when our reaction to stimulus is to freeze or retreat and hide away, the sympathetic response, the fight or flight mode and the ventral vagal state which is socially active and co-regulating.

So which of these three states of the autonomic nervous system is best for learning?

Dorsal vagal? I think not. We need to help someone out of the dorsal vagal state if that is where they are during the lesson.

Sympathetic, i.e. when the sympathetic chain is overstimulated? Well this is better, there is a lot of energy around and that is good and you might get strong impressions of whatever is given

and received in the sympathetic state. However, if you go on all day in the sympathetic state that is exhausting so teaching and having students who are in this state can be exhausting.

Ventral vagal? This is the socially interactive, more comfortable and more engaged, co-regulating state. I believe this is the ideal state for learning. Michel Thomas seems to agree ‘make yourself completely comfortable and be interactive during the lessons.’ We can help our students into the ventral vagal state by using our hands and giving them directions to self-regulate.

I believe the world of education really needs the Alexander Technique because we explore what it is to be human and that is what education is about. STAT has a special interest group that looks at education. The Developing Self is another group of teachers working on education for all ages. If F.M. was still alive now I am sure he would be interested in his teachers working in education environments and how he would be encouraging us to teach would be so interesting. How would his opinions and teachings have evolved over the 66 years? Let’s hope we are carrying the torch for him in a way that would make him happy. We know that in 1910 in *Man’s Supreme Inheritance* Alexander expressed himself in a way that is unacceptable to us today. We cannot ignore or excuse what he wrote and published then. His thinking and words had changed by 1932 in *The Use of the Self*.

I would like to conclude this lecture by reading the final words from *The Use of the Self*.

If this technique were to me made the basis of an education plan, so the growing generation could acquire a more valid criterion for self judgment than is now possible with the prevailing condition of misdirection of use, might this not lead in time to the substitution of reasoning reactions for those instinctive reactions which are manifested as prejudice, racial and otherwise, herd instinct, undue ‘self-determination’ and rivalry, etc, which, as we all deplore, have so far brought to nought our efforts to realise goodwill to all men and peace Earth. (Alexander 1932, 87)

(Available to watch on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/1S0smL6RB0w>)

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Endnotes

- 1 Educare Small School and Alexander Work : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LL03ZaTWtjY>

- 2 The Alexander Principles, James Douglas: <https://youtu.be/bqgj1FPVvMA>
- 3 Roger Federer rallies: <https://youtu.be/yj9BPGQs38M>
- 4 Mendelssohn Piano Sextet in D Major: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f4uLvCQK4Ug>
- 5 Alexander Technique for Singers NYCGB: <https://youtu.be/eLmvZjT7psw?t=124>
- 6 The Ready List: <https://youtu.be/-Cf8XbZ0N6A>
- 7 Alexander Technique For Singers, Davidona Pittock: <https://youtu.be/604I8htjKgk>