

A question of hands: *more or less?*

The future of FM Alexander's kinaesthetic re-education in the use of the self. Diana Devitt-Dawson writes.

“What are the hands for?” And, “How important is any particular placing of the hands?” These questions were asked by the reviewer of the book *Think More Do Less* in *STATnews*, Vol 9, Issue 9, January 2018.¹ Despite the importance of these questions, apparently no-one took up the offer to reply. So now, in May 2024, I would like to do so, and also to address what the reviewer is looking for, i.e., “...to say something explicit about what direction is, or what is special about touch.”

All these enquires can be answered by anyone who experiences a course of traditionally taught (hands-on) lessons, “taught to principle”, to use Marjory Barlow’s phrase. Such lessons are required, first and foremost, in order to refine one’s faulty sensory awareness (kinaesthetic sense) which in turn, will allow multiple new experiences that offer great learning.

Alexander reminds us,

“Sensory appreciation conditions conception – you can’t know a thing by an instrument that is wrong.”

Pupils who undergo a course of hands-on lessons immediately recognise that words alone cannot allow understanding of FM Alexander’s teaching. They also recognise that it is the human touch of the Alexander teacher’s highly specialised hands-on skill - gentle but directive - that allows a pupil to understand what Alexander meant by inhibition, and his injunction not to ‘do’ and instead to send directions to the head, neck and back relationship (HN&B), or what he called the ‘primary control’.

Regarding the primary control. Aldous Huxley writes in his article “End-gaining and Means-whereby”,

“Alexander’s fundamental discovery was this: there exists in men, as in all other vertebrates, a primary control conditioning the proper use of the total organism. When the head is in a certain relation to the neck, and the neck in a certain relation to the trunk, then (it is a matter of brute empirical fact) the entire psycho-physical organism is functioning to the best of its natural capacity.”²

“ The point of using the hands is to put meaning into those words... because when a pupil comes to you at first, it’s like a lot of jibberish. It doesn’t mean anything.



Marjory Barlow (right)

FM Alexander’s teaching is concerned with fundamental change and freedom from automatic, harmful habits of reaction that affect one’s manner of use and functioning. In this sense Alexander’s teaching is not a postural re-education or an exercise program, nor is it just kinaesthetic learning without hands-on work that re-educates one’s kinaesthetic sense (i.e., learning to do that which one cannot do oneself).

Alexander’s teaching was regarded as a highly sophisticated, psycho-physical, kinaesthetic, re-education in the use of the self. And so it is regarded today, by those who have experienced traditional hands-on teaching. Therefore, should we not ask: will there be consequences for this teaching, and those seriously looking to understand it, if the hands-on skill becomes minimalistic or disappears altogether?

For new grads, teachers and students, there is valuable reading in Ruth Rootberg’s article “Handing the Experience to the Pupil - The Role of the Hands in Alexander Technique”.³

What are the hands for?

As Marjory Barlow says (square brackets indicate where words have been added to the original):

“The point of using the hands is to put meaning into those words [(neck free, head forward and up on the neck, to let the back lengthen and widen)] because when a pupil comes to you at first it’s like a lot of jibberish, it doesn’t mean anything.”⁴

Walter Carrington:

“Teachers of the technique do need to learn a special way of using their hands.”

And,

“The teacher’s hands are the most important means by which the meaning of such phrases as ‘neck to be free’ and ‘head forward and up’ can be correctly conveyed to the pupil.”⁵

Patrick Macdonald:

“The teacher can, with his / her hands, counteract the wrong directions and persuade the pupil into giving the right directions, which must always include directions to the neck, head and back. Now, all this seems straightforward, but it is often not as simple as it sounds. For instance, sometimes the inhibitory ‘withholding of action’ and subsequent giving of directions can accentuate the very thing that we are trying to get rid of... beware of zombyism!”⁶

Erika Whittaker, commenting on a new graduate working on her.

“I waited, and waited... but nothing. It was just ‘putting hands-on’. But of course, there is much more to it than that. When FM put his hands on you, you got direction straight away.”⁷

Or consider Elisabeth Walker and Peggy Williams, in response to the question, “So you see hands as the primary way of helping...?”:

Elisabeth Walker: “Of helping them to stop.”

Peggy Williams: “Yes, because what you’re trying to teach, even without words, is how to inhibit. And, you can, through your hands, in giving a good experience, teach a person how to be still, and how not to jump when they think they’re going to be taken out of the chair.” (In interview with Catherine Kettrick, *Direction* magazine, Vol. 2, No.10).

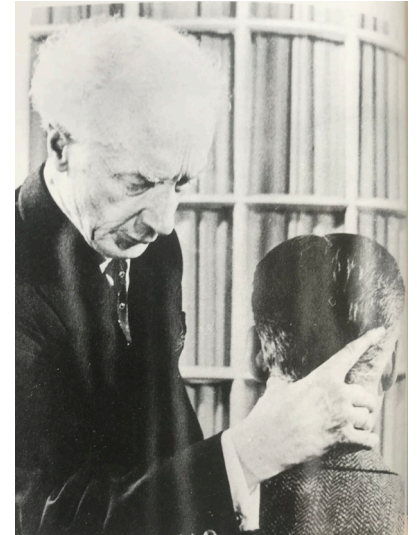


(Standing, left to right) Toni del Mar and Peter Scott (1978).

The human touch: teaching in relationship

It is the quality of the human touch of the Alexander teacher’s hands, by embodying the principles of conscious inhibition and conscious direction, that allows their teaching to be effective. Pupils experience a gentle, “flow of a force - upwards...” as described by Patrick Macdonald, the moment the teachers hands make contact. The Alexander teacher’s touch is

reassuring, directive, non-hesitant, receptive and caring. Such skilful hands-on work defines and differentiates our teaching from any other hands-on modality.



The Alexander teacher’s art

Alexander’s highly refined hands-on skills, with a particular hand placement (visible in photographs) on the head, neck and back relationship, has been described as “scientific” in quality, thus an art and a science:

“Speaking as a pupil, it was because of this fact as demonstrated in personal experience that I first became convinced of the scientific quality of Mr Alexander’s work. Each lesson was a laboratory experimental demonstration.”

(John Dewey)⁸

The role of the Alexander teacher

FM:

“...the teacher will ask the pupil to give [(think)] the new messages [(directions)] necessary to carry out the new means-whereby required for bringing about that employment of the primary control [(HN & B relationship)] of the use of himself which is fundamental in conditioning reflexes. At the same time the teacher will with his hands give the pupil the actual sensory experience of the new employment of the primary control...” FM Alexander⁹

Is hand placement important? The difficulties

Lulie Westfeldt:

“The first essential for a teacher is to be able to get the HN & B pattern functioning in a pupil. This pattern consists of a number of steps in a sequence. The second

one, ‘head forward and up in relation to the neck’ is overwhelmingly difficult and has caused the failure of more teachers than any other factor or combination of factors.”¹⁰

Students training with FM Alexander learned to cultivate this skill during their four-year training, but only after much dedicated discipline and extensive practical hands-on work on one another. The outcome was that they all became competent and confident teachers, able to bridge FM’s theory with practice. Those who went on to become Heads of Training set-up the traditional teacher training, and passed on those practical skills to their students. Teacher training with a first-generation teacher consisted of five consecutive days per week (mornings or afternoons) for three years. Many hours of practical instruction and guidance were required due to the complexities involved in learning hands-on skill that demonstrated Alexander’s founding principles.

Hands-on: more or less?

Should we, as teachers, not question why (in his later years) Alexander said to Goddard Binkley,

“Teaching this work is a wonderful career, a wonderful career, but very difficult. The training course is three years, but it ought to be six years. This is so true that sometimes I’ve felt like giving up the course altogether.”¹¹

Lulie Westfeldt made an interesting observation during her own teacher training,

“I remember thinking one day that almost any intelligent person could do with his hands what I was doing, if he would give his attention to the matter for about six weeks. Surely, I thought, there must be more to Alexander’s work than this. The colleagues we worked on sometimes felt ‘light’ as they stood up or walked about, but, as we rightly surmised, this was simply the result of an undue lengthening which required no skill, and was a far cry indeed from the balanced lengthening and widening of the HN & B pattern which resulted in the body operating on a new control. Fortunately some of us had sense enough to know that we were producing no such basic change in the body of any colleague we worked on.”

Lulie then went on to describe how Alexander gave guidance to his students in hands-on work.

“FM’s method of teaching us was first to have us put our hands on a fellow student’s head; then he would place his hands on top of ours; and with a quick movement he would take the student’s head ‘forward and up in relation to the neck’.”

“This most difficult step of ‘head forward and up’ requires lucid, detailed explanation as well as manual demonstration if the student is to acquire the understanding and manual skill necessary to bring it about.”¹²

Erika Whittaker in her 1985 STAT Memorial Lecture also describes how FM guided a student’s hand-placement,

“...When we began to use our hands, in the third year, we had great help – FM putting his hands over ours and giving us directions, and it was something I was very sorry that later generations could not have had...”¹³

Marjory Barlow, while training, commented:

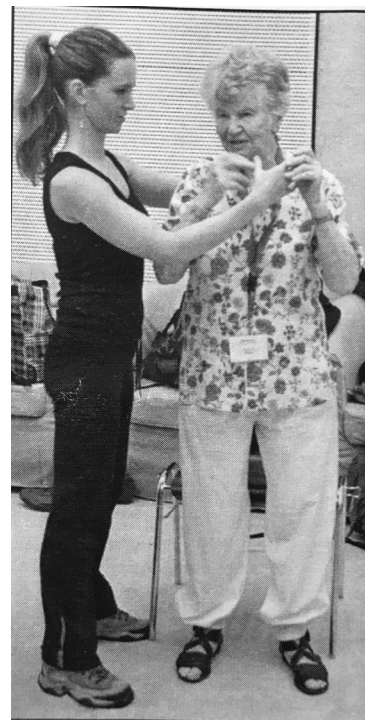
“He [(Alexander)] used to start us working, using our hands, with somebody lying down on the couch. Taking a head, that was the first thing. And very often he would put his hands over ours. Pat Macdonald used to do that a lot too.”¹⁴

Students, new grads and teachers today, can also benefit by observing such teaching of students on the DVD “1: Chair Work by Patrick Macdonald”, available from Hite.

The majority of the first-generation teachers embodied the principles of conscious inhibition and conscious control. They seemed to be in a state of ‘readiness,’ to meet any stimulus, difficult or otherwise, with calm and grace, fully alert to the moment. And many lived well into their old age while continuing to maintain healthy private practices.

On inhibition, FM commented:

“In all the years that I have been teaching pupils whose use of themselves is wrong, I have never yet found any of them able to inhibit the desire to gain an end directly until their unsatisfactory use has been changed.”



Elisabeth Walker explains (right)

And,

And,

“When a person has reached a given stage of unsatisfactory use and functioning, his habit of ‘end-gaining’ will prove to be the impeding factor in all his attempts to profit by any teaching method whatsoever.”

And,

“This criticism applies to methods employed by teachers of all sports and games, of physical culture, eurythmics, dancing, singing, etc.”¹⁵

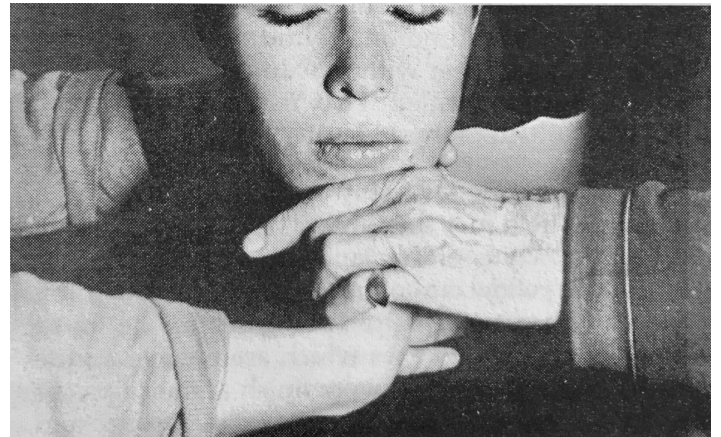
Alexander lessons vs kinaesthetic learning.

FM Alexander lessons should not be confused with or seen as kinaesthetic learning. Such learning includes relying on verbal or written explanation, doing repetitive actions or movements while trusting one’s faulty sensory awareness. Such doing of repetitive actions is to alter ‘muscle memory’ along with trying to feel out if one is right or not. etc.. But, Alexander clarifies, “You can’t tell a person what to do because the thing you have to do is a sensation”.¹⁶

Alexander lessons involve teaching a pupil to think differently i.e., not to end gain but rather, to have a constructive, reasoned, means whereby any end may be attained but without one’s harmful habits of use and reaction. By applying Alexander’s “new” means-whereby, of conscious inhibition and conscious direction to the NH&B (neck, head and back) relationship, the whole organism benefits (indirectly) and allows a return to balance, fine co-ordination and natural breathing.

However, there are many paradoxes in Alexander’s teaching. For example, what one sees (when observing a lesson) is not what it is about i.e., repetitive movements such as being taken in and out of a chair, or doing any other ‘procedure.’ There is no repetition in Alexander lessons. Each movement is unique to the moment as one inhibits and directs the neck, head and back relationship – no end in sight. Each touch by the teacher is a new experience, different in every respect, often to the delight and surprise of both teacher and pupil.

“Lulie Westfeldt: ‘This most difficult step of “head forward and up” requires lucid, detailed explanation as well as manual demonstration if the student is to acquire the understanding and manual skill necessary to bring it about.’



Patrick Macdonald (hands at right) guides a student.

Science and art - the integrated self

FM Alexander recognised ‘the self’ as a psychophysical, emotional, spiritual whole. His teaching is not purely left-brain, relying on knowledge alone. In the insightful books *The Master and His Emissary* and the more recent *The Matter With Things*, Iain McGilchrist explains that, while our left-brain makes for a wonderful servant, it is a very poor master.¹⁷ He shows that it is the right-brain which is more reliable and insightful and that without it our world would be mechanistic – stripped of depth, colour and value. The right-brain experiences sensations from the body and the left-brain analyses these sensations and puts words to them. McGilchrist explains how to integrate both hemispheres for the benefit of the whole self and with an understanding of their interconnectedness.

With hands-on Alexander lessons we bridge theory with practice using both left- and right-brain, and that integrates the whole self and heightens sensory perception and much more.

Professor Coghill states,

“If the wholeness is lost through a decline in the mechanism of total integration, it is the basis of that conflict in behaviour which expresses itself widely in the field of psychotherapy.”

And,

“Unsatisfactory use of the individual could never arise if the mechanism of total integration were maintaining its inhibitory dominance.”¹⁸

On verbal instruction alone in teaching Alexander’s work, Sir Charles Sherrington, OM, says something relevant:

“A chair unsuited to a child can quickly induce special and bad habits of sitting and breathing. In urbanised and industrialized communities bad habits in our motor acts are especially common. But verbal instruction as to how

to correct wrong habits of movement and posture is very difficult. The scantiness of our sensory perception of how we do them makes it so. The faults tend to escape our direct observation and recognition.”¹⁹

The future

Does the future of FM Alexander’s teaching, as a kinaesthetic, psychophysical, re-education in the use of the self and human reaction, depend on how we, as teachers, present, demonstrate and teach his work? Should we, as teachers, offer *more* or *less* practical, hands-on work to the general public and the serious enquirer?

Minimalistic hands-on would certainly be the easier option but would that refine one’s faulty sensory awareness and improve one’s manner of use (that in turn, enable one to inhibit and direct in all stressful and difficult situations)? Alexander teaching is about fundamental change and freedom from habit for all people, young and old.

In STAT’s *The Alexander Journal*, No.2, Summer 1963, the article by Edward H Owen, “Alexander and the mastery of habit” states,

“... the method of re-education he worked out was nothing less than a technique for freeing ourselves from the conditioning grip of habit – and, as such, a contribution to human liberation, the implications of which have hardly begun to be explored.”

And, the editorial of the same publication (presumably speaking with the voice of the editorial committee which included Wilfred Barlow and Patrick Macdonald), says:

“It is surely apparent then that one can speak of an ‘authentic form’ of Alexander’s work, as opposed to forms that do not get to grips so fundamentally with this problem of habit – for a diagnosis that does not go deep enough is always liable to create further problems and ills.”

He goes on to add,

“It would be sad indeed if Alexander’s teaching were ever to be submerged in and confused with methods that are altogether less profoundly based... there is an authentic form, a form derived from clearly reasoned-out principles – which all teachers and pupils must do their utmost to safeguard.”

Final words from a first generation teacher, Margaret Goldie

In a letter from Margaret Goldie, she says,

“It is of greatest interest to me to see how the younger people are developing – the future of the work is now really in your hands, and one hopes to see Alexander’s first principles used unflinchingly as basic to your understanding and use of the work. Results follow unremittingly the means-whereby.”²⁰

References

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About the author

Diana Devitt-Dawson is Head of Training at the Alexander Technique Institute in North Sydney, Australia. She has a website at www.alexandertechniqueinstitute.com.au.