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# HANDING the EXPERIENCE to the PUPIL

## The Role of the Hands in Alexander Technique Teaching

by Ruth Rootberg

### INTRODUCTION

F.M. ALEXANDER used a variety of pedagogical strategies to engage each of his private pupils in the particular way needed in the moment. Reading his writings, we find that these strategies included:

- 1 suggesting a pupil<sup>1</sup> read his books
- 2 reassuring and allaying anxieties at the outset of lessons
- 3 observing, diagnosing (evaluating) the pupil's present condition
- 4 teaching the pupil how to be taught
- 5 explaining principles
- 6 giving an example by imitating incorrect movement;
- 7 demonstrating what improved coordination could look like
- 8 giving verbal instructions
- 9 engaging the pupil's thinking
- 10 directing on behalf of the pupil
- 11 teaching the pupil to inhibit and direct
- 12 providing repeated experiences
- 13 increasing, gradually, the pupil's responsibility to inhibit and direct during the lesson
- 14 giving hands-on instruction

This article addresses points 9 through 14 and primarily numbers 9: engaging the pupil's thinking; and 14: giving hands-on instruction.

I had my first Alexander Technique lessons in 1969 with Frank Pierce Jones, and since then, my ongoing assumption has been that instruction during lessons includes both the teacher's hands and verbal communication. I have had lessons that involved little talking, but never a lesson when the teacher's hands were not providing kinesthetic input for the entire—or almost the entire—lesson. In this sense, teachers have handed the experience to me.

My assumption about the need for the hands has been challenged in recent years by the introduction of video conferencing as a means of instructing individuals. This new style of distance teaching eliminates the possibility of using the hands. The development of this hands-off interactive electronic instruction has raised many questions and stimulated serious debate among members of the Alexander community.

I have been involved with this topic as Chair of AmSAT's Professional Conduct Committee, but now I write as a teacher who gives hands-on instruction to private pupils and who takes lessons and post-graduate workshops to improve my hands-on skills.

The debate led me to research:

- When did Alexander begin to use his hands to instruct?
- Why did he put hands on his pupils in the first place?

- How did his pupils describe their first experiences of his hands?
- What did Alexander write about the role that the hands play in teaching and learning?
- What did Alexander write about the pupil's role during lessons?

I thought that if I had a more thorough understanding of Alexander's thoughts on using the hands and teaching pupils to inhibit and direct, then I would be better prepared to ask specific questions of teachers who offer online instruction.

In carrying out my research, I re-read from Alexander's published works, looking for passages that included at least one of these words: "hand(s)," "manipulation,"<sup>2</sup> "touch," "teacher," and "technique." I read biographical material about Alexander, as well as personal accounts of lessons by some of Alexander's pupils. Also, I conducted one brief interview.

I learned that Alexander started to use his hands almost as soon as he began to teach, perhaps as early as 1895 (see anecdote page 37). And I read in Frank Pierce Jones's book *Freedom to Change*<sup>3</sup> that around 1914 Alexander realized he could apply inhibition—the same principle of non-doing that he had been teaching his pupils—to the way he used his hands to instruct his pupils during lessons. He continued to develop his hands-on skills throughout his life, and the descriptions written by his pupils confirm that the quality of his touch made a significant impression on them.

I offer here a compilation of dozens of passages by Alexander that describes the various roles the hands play in teaching and learning. Alexander often wrote that the hands give new sensory experiences, which, in combination with verbal instruction and the pupil's growing ability to inhibit and direct, bring about change in habits of coordination. Alexander expected the hands would be an essential element in early lessons and that at first, the pupil would be relatively passive, allowing himself to be taught. As the pupil learned to inhibit and direct, gradually, he would take on more responsibility for inhibition and direction, and the hands would play a less dominant role in the teaching interaction. Eventually, the pupil would be able to bring about change by himself without the teacher's hands or words.

### ORIGINS OF ALEXANDER'S USE OF THE HANDS

#### When did Alexander begin to use his hands?

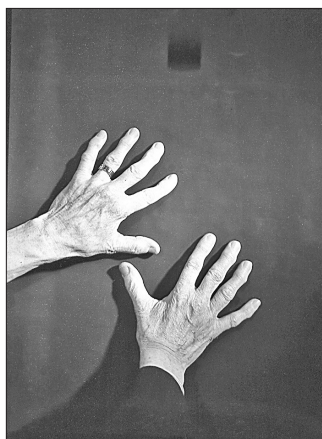
Alexander learned to improve his use and solve his vocal problems without the benefit of a teacher, so, obviously, without a teacher's hands. He began teaching in 1894, and Michael Bloch, Alexander's biographer, marks 1896 as the year Alexander first rented teaching rooms in Melbourne, Australia. Bloch says Alexander's method



at that time “may already have involved some use of the hands to guide the pupil in the right directions.”<sup>4</sup> That is certainly possible. Walter Carrington related these anecdotes about Alexander when he was teaching voice production as early as 1895<sup>5</sup> in New Zealand:

*An elderly woman from New Zealand had contacted Ashley Place to ask for a lesson with FM, and said that, as a much younger woman, she'd been in that first group that he taught in New Zealand—the group that asked him to stay on and teach them because they were so impressed with his voice and breathing when he was doing a recital or acting tour.*

*So they booked her in for a lesson. She came along; she had her lesson, she went out, and FM—Walter must have been around in the hallway or something—because he said FM spoke to him and said, “It was lovely to see her after all those years.” And then he said, “But I look back in horror at what I was doing to them with my hands in those days. I was lucky that I got away with it.”<sup>6</sup>*



Alexander's hands

*I'm certain he used his hands from the very beginning. A group of people came to him after his last public recital in Auckland, New Zealand, and asked if he would give them lesson in voice.... He described his discoveries to the group: how he had stiffened his neck, pulled his head back, raised his chest and so on. While he was explaining this to them, he was using his hands to get it across. After all, if someone says: “What do you mean by pulling down under the chin and pulling your head back?”, you would naturally show them, wouldn't you? So he was using his hands in those early days and did so increasingly as time went on.<sup>7</sup>*

We may conclude, then, that Alexander used his hands almost from the beginning of his teaching career. His brother A.R. Alexander was said to have learned the principles from FM in 1896, purportedly without receiving hands-on instruction and in only six lessons.<sup>8</sup> Frank Pierce Jones wrote that AR then joined FM in developing the work. “The two brothers experimented with each other and together worked out various procedures and instructions, which were incorporated into the Technique.”<sup>9</sup> Perhaps they used their hands on each other to experiment and work out teaching procedures.

In the small pamphlet “Re-Education of the Kinaesthetic Systems” published in 1908, Alexander set down his teaching model:

*The teacher, having decided upon the orders necessary for securing the elongation of the spine, the freedom of the neck (i.e. requisite natural laxness) and other conditions desirable to the particular case in hand, will then ask the pupil to rehearse them mentally, at the same time that he himself renders assistance by the skilful use of his hands.<sup>10</sup>*

We know from his writings and other accounts that Alexander continued to develop his hands-on skills throughout his long career. A significant change in his hands-on technique was noted by Jones, who wrote that in 1914 Alexander was

*just beginning to find a new way of using his hands in teaching. By applying the inhibitory control (which had proved so effective in breathing and speaking) to the use of his hands he was learning to make changes in a pupil that were different from ordinary manipulation or postural adjustment.<sup>11</sup>*

In the early 1930s, Alexander began training teachers, and he shared a watershed experience with his first group of trainees. Lulie Westfeldt recollected:

*[H]e came into the classroom one morning and said exultingly, “I can get it now in spite of them”. He said that his hands were now sufficiently skilled to get the new HN & B pattern going without the pupil's help.<sup>12</sup>*

Irene Tasker noted a change and development in Alexander's manner of teaching from her first lessons to later years. She considered the entire lesson, not just the use of Alexander's hands:

*The older teachers here tonight will know that F.M.'s teaching was never static. He was always learning, always changing. But in those very early days—this was in 1913, before the first world war—his manner of teaching was entirely different from what it became in the later years.<sup>13</sup>*

Walter Carrington said that Alexander recognized the significance of the skills he had gained over time and acknowledged the rudimentary ways he had worked earlier in his career:

*I remember him telling me the story of working on a woman in Australia who had a very fixed ribcage after having contracted TB. When he looked back on that episode in the light of what he subsequently knew, he was horrified to think what he'd tried to do in an effort to free her ribs. He was obviously making some sort of positive effort to get the ribs to move—performing a definite manipulation, if you like. But my overall impression is that it wasn't until quite late in his life that FM really appreciated the tremendous importance of the skill he'd developed with his hands.<sup>14</sup>*

Carrington also noted that Alexander's work became even more effective after his two strokes [usually spoken of as one<sup>15</sup>].

*[A]fter Alexander had his stroke in the last years of his life, he didn't have the same physical strength that he had previously.... So, far from reacting as stroke patients often do, by trying harder when they realize they haven't got the same physical resources, he went, so to speak, the opposite way. And it fitted in with his understanding and concept. He did less, and as he did less, he got better results, more effective results.<sup>16</sup>*

*A major change was imposed on him after his stroke, when he no longer possessed his former strength.... I've always maintained that the quality of his teaching improved quite remarkably. You see, he had to give more attention to thought and direction.<sup>17</sup>*

Film footage<sup>18</sup> of Alexander taken in 1949 and 1950, after his strokes, shows him teaching and provides a clear demonstration of how he used his hands when his skills were at their highest level of sophistication.

#### Why did Alexander begin to use his hands?

Alexander did not specifically address this question, but his writing gives many clues, particularly passages about the universal problem of untrustworthy sensory awareness and the ineffectiveness of words in addressing this problem. Perhaps it was out of frustration that his words and demonstrations did not produce the effects he was looking for that Alexander began to use his hands. He recognized that the pupil could not fully understand his ideas when communicated verbally, because words were conditioned by the habitual meaning the pupil gave to those words, and that meaning was influenced by the pupil's use. Therefore, the pupil interpreted FM's verbal explanations inaccurately and could not grasp what he was trying to communicate. For example, what does "let the neck be free" mean to someone with a chronically tight neck?

*The significance, however, of the fact that a person's attempt to make practical use of a new idea is conditioned by his conception of the written or spoken word, cannot be fully realized until we connect it with the further fact, that this conception, in its turn, is conditioned by the standard of the psycho-physical functioning of the individual, this standard again being influenced by the standard of sensory appreciation; in other words, that the accuracy or otherwise of the individual conception depends upon the standard of psycho-physical functioning and of sensory appreciation present. It is our total disregard of this fundamental fact that, in my opinion, is at the root of all the confusion and uncertainty so prevalent today in the sphere of education, and, for that matter, in every sphere of practical life.*<sup>19</sup>

Alexander took pains to address the need to improve sensory appreciation by giving the pupil repeated hands-on experiences, while the pupil simply rehearsed the orders without attempting to carry them out:

*He is simply deluded regarding his sensations and unable to direct his actions. I do not therefore, in teaching him, actually order him to lengthen his spine by performing any explicit action, but I cause him to rehearse the correct guiding orders, and after placing him in a position of mechanical advantage I am able by my manipulation to bring about, directly or indirectly as the case may be, the desired flexibility and extension.*<sup>20</sup>

Alexander was convinced of the importance of restoring the reliability of the pupil's sensory appreciation, and he had no confidence in teaching methods that did not address this problem:

*The application of these principles in any sphere of learning means that the teacher during lessons must be able to supply the pupil's needs in the matter of reliable sensory appreciation, by giving*

*him from day to day the necessary experiences until they become established. No technique which does not meet the demands herein indicated will prove satisfactory as a means of re-educating a pupil on a general basis to a reliable plane of conscious activity.*<sup>21</sup>

In summary, Alexander began to use his hands to help communicate what words alone could not convey and to assist in the restoration of trustworthy sensory appreciation. He developed a specific vocabulary to explain what he had experienced in himself, but acknowledged the inadequacy of words alone in communicating his meaning:

«He recognized that the pupil could not fully understand his ideas when communicated verbally, because words were conditioned by the habitual meaning the pupil gave to those words, and that meaning was influenced by the pupil's use.»

#### 4. Head Forward and Up

*This is one of the most inadequate and often confusing phrases used as a means of conveying our ideas in words, and it is a dangerous instruction to give to any pupil, unless the teacher first demonstrates his meaning by giving to the pupil, by means of manipulation, the exact experiences involved.*<sup>22</sup>

*Supposing I were to bring you all out one after the other and talk to you for half-an-hour and give you instruction, and not use my hands to give you the experience of what is required, you would all, in trying to put your head up, do this, or this. [Alexander demonstrates.]*<sup>23</sup>

Alexander sometimes recommended that pupils read his books:

*If, at the end of our talk, I consider that there is any doubt on the part of the prospective pupil, I beg him to read my book, study the principles therein set down, and then, if he comprehends and believes in these principles, I suggest that he should come to me for help, but not otherwise.*<sup>24</sup>

He did not, however, believe that the books alone would guide someone sufficiently to learn the Technique. In late 1949 or early 1950, Hugh Massey had one lesson with Alexander and then, convalescing from tuberculosis, spent time over a few years reading Alexander's books and practicing his thinking while lying down. Massey felt that his recovery from tuberculosis was partly due to this practice, and he called the Technique a lifesaver. However, when he returned to London for another lesson, Alexander was not pleased by what Massey was doing. Massey reported some of their conversation:

*"I may not know how to get out of a chair to satisfy you," I [Massey] answer him [Alexander], "but I've learnt the essence of your technique and I would be approaching death by now had I not done so."*

*"You haven't learned my technique. I don't know what you've done, but you are not a proper example of my technique. Now, do you want to continue taking lessons or not? It's entirely up to you."...*

*It is not long before it is made plain that I have not absorbed the technique in the way that Alexander teaches it. I find it difficult to get out of a chair without pulling my head back. It is through the acquisition of this skill that so much of the effectiveness of Alexander's work is obtained.*<sup>25</sup>



Louise Morgan never had a lesson with Alexander, but read his books, interviewed him around 1953, and published her own book about the technique, *Inside Yourself*.<sup>26</sup> In the interview, Morgan asked Alexander whether people could learn his technique by reading his books. Alexander answered promptly:

*“Depends on whether they can read! And whether they are prepared to accept a practice and theory that is a revolution in thought and action.... Most people today can’t read.”*<sup>27</sup>

**Impressions of Alexander’s hands**  
How did Alexander’s pupils perceive his hands-on work? The following quotes describe early lesson experiences:

*“And now let’s get down to work,” he said, taking up his position beside her and putting his hands on her head.*

*With deft and expert touches of hand and fingers he explored her head and neck muscles, turning the head slightly from side to side, feeling the various parts of the head and neck as if he were, so to speak, dissecting the living muscles and fibres.* (Louise Morgan’s account of Miss G. R.)<sup>28</sup>

*I would have cancelled the appointment. Thank God I did not, for in keeping it I experienced something I had never experienced before which convinced me that here at last was something to bite on—something that had a basic principle upon which one could build.* (Carla Atkinson)<sup>29</sup>

*[B]ut of those hands I had no previous knowledge. I wasn’t supposed to notice them much (!)—just give the “directions” and nothing else. Really nothing.* (Eva Webb)<sup>30</sup>

*He placed one hand on top of my head and the other one under my chin.* (Frank Hand)<sup>31</sup>

*Then he proceeded to show me an alternative. With his hands, like a sculptor at work, he readjusted my body back to something approaching a decent coordination—at least a much better one than the usual, and then helped me to get into the chair and out of it again without losing the new adjustment.... I had by sheer decision on my part and with the help of his sensitive hands stopped myself from pulling the head back and down on to the spine and as a result the working of my entire body seemed to be different.... Nor was it manipulative readjustment in the usual sense. It was something entirely new and it seemed ridiculously simple.* (Sir George Trevelyan)<sup>32</sup>

*In my first lesson I understood very little, if anything, of what Alexander was doing or what he wanted me to do. He used his hands on me a great deal and in the most subtle, delicate way, making what seemed to be minute, infinitesimal changes in my body in the region of my head, neck, and back.... At the end of the lesson he walked me around the room with his hands on my*

*head, and I felt as light as air.... Alexander’s hands were amazing; sometimes they almost seemed to be doing nothing at all or something that was so imperceptible that it passed for nothing.... His hands impressed me so much that I thought over the qualities they possessed. They were dry, cool, light and impersonal, but*

*above all they had a quality that gave me complete confidence and made me want to go with them.* (Lulie Westfeldt)<sup>33</sup>

*FM put his hands on her and she knew that this was what she needed.* (Fiona Robb’s narrative of Margaret Goldie’s first lesson)<sup>34</sup>

*Alexander’s hands were quite incredible—they were so knowing, perceptive and sensitive. Some students thought they almost had a life of their own.* (Peggy Williams)<sup>35</sup>

*The first time he put his hand on my head, it was as if he had a magnet*

*there. I was sitting upright, and I could feel a connection go right through me, right into my womb. It was extraordinary!* (Peggy Williams)<sup>36</sup>

*The lesson was amazing. His hands seemed to draw me right up out of the chair. I felt like a different person, but I tried holding on to it.* (Elisabeth Walker)<sup>37</sup>

*It felt like, Ah, maybe the world is all right.... And I got the feeling of coming home, where I was supposed to be.* (Rome Earle)<sup>38</sup>

*Meanwhile, he has sat me down in a high-backed, hard-seated chair and moves his large, rather ugly hands about my person. First, gently on the top of my head, then on the neck which he squeezes a little between thumb and fingers. Finally he moves his hand over my back in sweeping strokes, talking to me all the time about illnesses in general.* (Hugh Massey)<sup>39</sup>

*I was with him this first visit for little more than a quarter of an hour. He talked little while using his hands on me, asking a few questions now and then. The touch of his hands was something I’ll always remember, gentle, with now and again light, gradual pressure. Standing at my left, he put his left hand on top of my head while his right hand explored my back. I felt as though he sensed my entire being. It made me glow!* (Goddard Binkley)<sup>40</sup>

These impressions of Alexander’s hands show us that pupils encountered new sensory experiences in early lessons, which was a primary reason he gave for hands-on instruction.

#### AIM AND PURPOSE OF PSYCHO-PHYSICAL RE-EDUCATION

Alexander did not write a teaching manual, and passages in his writings that discuss using the hands are not located in a particular book or article. He published specific descriptions of movements



*In this article, this and all subsequent photographs are snapshots of F.M. Alexander using his hands in a lesson*

in different places. The earliest version of the procedure “hands on back of chair” is found in a paper dated from 1910.<sup>41</sup> The later and much more detailed version of the same procedure is included in *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual*, published in 1923.<sup>42</sup> Those lengthy descriptions of procedures are not included in this paper.

This section provides an overview of Alexander’s purpose and process in using the hands. Phrases such as “uses expert manipulation,” makes “the required readjustments,” performs “particular movements,” “moves the parts,” and places the pupil in “a position of mechanical advantage” indicate that the teacher is using the hands as part of the teaching process. The emphasis is not on the fact that the teacher uses the hands but rather on the change in coordination that is brought about through hands-on instruction at the particular moment. I’m sure that by the time he began writing his books, Alexander considered the hands to be an integral part of the process and did not consider the need to explain why he used his hands.

In the next two lengthy passages, some phrases have been made bold because they will serve as subheads in the following section, “The Many Roles of the Hands in Teaching.”

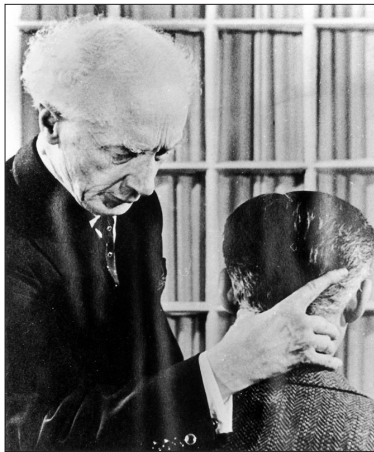
In these first quotations, Alexander addresses untrustworthy sensory awareness and how he goes about correcting this problem:

*First then, this scheme demands in particular on the part of the teacher a recognition of the almost alarming dominance of the pupil’s psycho-physical processes by an incorrect sensory appreciation during the attempted performance of any psycho-physical activity. It is therefore of primary importance that the teacher should recognize and endeavour to awaken his pupil to the fact of his (the pupil’s) unreliable sensory appreciation, and that during the processes involved in the performance of the pupil’s practical work he should cultivate and develop in him the new and reliable sensory appreciation upon which a satisfactory standard of co-ordination depends.*

*To this end the mode of procedure is as follows. The teacher, having made his diagnosis of the cause or causes of the imperfections or defects which the pupil has developed in the incorrect use of himself, uses expert manipulation to give to the pupil the new sensory experiences required for the satisfactory use of the mechanisms concerned, the while giving him the correct guiding orders or directions which are the counterpart of the new sensory experiences which he is endeavouring to develop by means of his manipulation.*

*This procedure constitutes the means whereby the teacher makes it possible for the pupil to prevent (inhibition) the misdirected activities which are causing his psycho-physical imperfections. In this work the inhibitory process must take first place, and remain the primary factor in each and every new experience which is to be gained and become established during the cultivation and development of reliable sensory appreciation upon which a satisfactory standard of co-ordination depends.*

*With this aim in view—that is, the prevention of misdirected activities—the teacher from the outset carefully explains to the pupil that his part in this scheme is very different from that which is usually assigned to pupils under other teaching methods. He tells the pupil that, on receiving the directions or guiding orders, he must not attempt to carry them out; that, on the contrary, he must inhibit the desire to do so in the case of each and every order which is given to him. He must instead project the guiding orders as given to him, whilst his teacher at the same time, by means of manipulation, will make the required readjustments and bring about the necessary co-ordinations, in this way performing for the pupil the particular movement or movements required, and giving him the new reliable sensory appreciation and the very best opportunity possible to connect the different guiding orders before attempting to put them into practice. This linking-up of the guiding orders or directions is all-important, for it is the counterpart of that linking-up of the parts of the organism which constitutes what we call co-ordination. The aim of re-education on a general basis is to bring about at all times and for all purposes, not a series of correct positions or postures, but a coordinated use of the mechanisms in general.<sup>43</sup>*



“The teacher ... uses expert manipulation to give to the pupil the new sensory experiences ... ”  
F.M. Alexander

*These preconceptions and habits of thought, therefore, must be broken down, and since the reactions of mind on body and body on mind are so intimate, it is often necessary to break down these preconceptions of mind by performing muscular acts for the subject vicariously; that is to say, the instructor must move the parts in question while the subject attends to the inhibition of all muscular movements. It would be impossible, however, to describe the method in full detail in this place, owing to the extraordinary variability of the*

*cases presented, no two of which exhibit precisely the same defects. On broad lines it is evident that the misuses must be diagnosed by the instructor, who may be called upon to use considerable ingenuity and patience in correcting the faults, and substituting the correct mental orders for the one general order which starts the old train of vicious habitual movements. The mental habit must be first attacked, and this mental habit usually lies below the level of consciousness; but it may be reached by introspection and analysis, and by the performance of the habitual acts by other than the habitual methods—that is, by physical acts performed consciously as an effect of the conscious conception and the conscious direction of the mind.*

*Speaking generally, it will be found that the pupil is quite unable to analyse his own actions. Tell a young golfer that he has taken his eye off the ball or swayed his body, and he feels sure, in his heart, that you are mistaken. The imperfectly poised person has not a correct apprehension of what he is really doing. In this apparently simple matter of the carriage or poise of the body I find in quite nine-tenths of my cases a harmful rigidity\* which is quite unconsciously assumed. When it is pointed out to them, and physically demonstrated, they almost invariably deny it indignantly.*

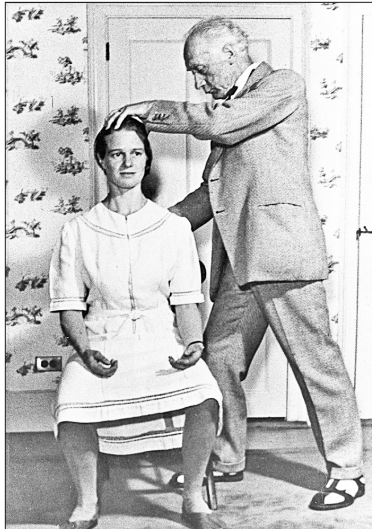


*I ask a new pupil to put his shoulders back and his head forward, and he will consistently put both back or forward. I tell a new pupil he is shortening his spine, and in attempting to lengthen it he invariably shortens it still more. The action is one over which he has neither learnt nor practised any control whatever. He is simply deluded regarding his sensations and unable to direct his actions. I do not therefore, in teaching him, actually order him to lengthen his spine by performing any explicit action, but I cause him to rehearse the correct guiding orders, and after placing him in a position of mechanical advantage I am able by my manipulation to bring about, directly or indirectly as the case may be, the desired flexibility and extension.*

*The process is of course repeated until the pupil gains a new kinaesthetic sense of the new and correct use of the parts, which become properly co-ordinated, and the correct habit is established. He will then no longer find it easy to cause his physical machinery to work as it did before the fault was thus effectively eradicated.<sup>44</sup>*

#### THE MANY ROLES OF THE HANDS IN TEACHING

This section includes quotations under subheads that are drawn from the bolded phrases above and that are grouped for their similarity in describing the various ways the hands assist during instruction.



**“...a recognition of the almost alarming dominance of the pupil’s psycho-physical processes by an incorrect sensory appreciation during the attempted performance of any psycho-physical activity”**

*[A]s soon as the teacher places his hands on the pupil and attempts to move him, he is at once in contact with his faulty and deceptive sense of feeling, the dominating sense in the subconsciously controlled person in such circumstances.<sup>45</sup>*

*When I ask a pupil to allow me to move his lower jaw away from the upper, he usually increases instinctively the tension that keeps the lower jaw in place.<sup>46</sup>*

*Almost all civilized human creatures have developed a condition in which the sensory appreciation (feeling) is more or less imperfect and deceptive, and it naturally follows that it cannot be relied upon in re-education, readjustment, and coordination, or in our attempts to put right something we know to be wrong with our psycho-physical selves. The connection\* between psycho-physical defects and incorrect sensory guidance\* must therefore be recognized by the teacher in the practical work of re-education. This recognition will make it impossible for him to expect a pupil to be able to perform satisfactorily any new psycho-physical act until the new correct experiences in sensory appreciation involved have become established.<sup>47</sup>*

Lulie Westfeldt interpreted Alexander’s early hands-on contact as part of his observation of her use:

*He examined me by watching me walk, stand, sit and get up. He placed his hands on me during these activities and noted what was happening. (Lulie Westfeldt)<sup>48</sup>*

**“...the teacher should recognize and endeavour to awaken his pupil to the fact of his (the pupil’s) unreliable sensory appreciation”**

*In the matter of conception, the first step is to convince the pupil that his present misdirected activities are the result of incorrect conception and of imperfect sensory appreciation (feeling).*

*Now, in this regard I would at once warn those who are inexperienced in this matter that the pupil, as a rule, will not be convinced on this point by discussion and argument alone. A pupil will, indeed, often assure his teacher that he sees the argument, and from his standpoint this statement may be true. But in my experience there is only one way by which a teacher can really convince a pupil that his sense of feeling is misleading him when he starts to carry out a movement, and that is by demonstration upon the pupil’s own organism. A mirror should be used, so that the pupil, as far as possible, can have ocular demonstration as well.<sup>49</sup>*

*One can recall the expression of interest, happiness, and satisfaction exhibited by the child when one has enabled him to understand\**

*for the first time that his unduly stiffened neck—with perhaps his head too far pulled back—is really not the fault of his neck at all, but is due to the fact that he is trying to do with the muscles of his neck what should be done by other mechanisms.<sup>50</sup>*

**“...cultivate and develop in him the new and reliable sensory appreciation”**

*By this procedure a gradual improvement will be brought about in the pupil’s sensory appreciation, so that he will become more and more aware of faults in his habitual manner of using himself; correspondingly, as with this increasing awareness the manner of his use of himself improves, his sensory appreciation will further improve and in time constitute a standard within the self by means of which he will become increasingly aware both of faults and of improvement, not only in the manner of his use but also in the standard of his functioning generally.<sup>51</sup>*

**“...uses expert manipulation to give to the pupil the new sensory experiences”**

*The most common form of this defective control encountered in teaching work is when the teacher wishes to move the head, or hand, or arm, or leg for the pupil, in order to give the new and correct sensation in the proper use of the parts.<sup>52</sup>*

*The teacher must with his hands move the pupil’s body for him in the particular act required, thereby giving him the correct kinaesthetic experience of the performance of the act.<sup>53</sup>*

*This brings us face to face with the demand for a teaching technique which will meet this difficulty, and such a technique involves correct manipulation on the part of the teacher in the matter of giving the pupil correct experiences in sensory appreciation, in the spheres of re-education, readjustment, and co-ordination.*<sup>54</sup>

*At a certain stage in her re-education she developed a conscious recognition of the new and correct experiences secured by the teacher's manipulation.*<sup>55</sup>

*I have found in my practical experience with pupils that in the process of learning to acquire a conscious in the place of an instinctive direction of their use, there comes about a corresponding improvement in their standard of functioning throughout the organism, and in the nature of their reactions generally.*

*The explanation of this lies in the nature of the process itself. For the fact that the pupil receives from the hands of the teacher the actual sensory experience of the new use which he is consciously directing, ensures for that pupil a gradual cultivation of sensory trustworthiness and awareness.*<sup>56</sup>

*At the same time the teacher will with his hands give the pupil the actual sensory experience of this new employment of the primary control, and thus will be able to help him to maintain the improving manner of use which results from this new experience in making any movement that may be required in the course of the lesson, such as that of moving from standing to sitting in a chair.*<sup>57</sup>

**“This procedure constitutes the means whereby the teacher makes it possible for the pupil to prevent (inhibition) the misdirected activities which are causing his psycho-physical imperfections”**

*When he has been made aware of these defects, he can be taught to inhibit the faulty movements, and his teacher can assist him to gain slowly but correctly the necessary experiences in the correct use of those muscular mechanisms which will enable him sooner or later to govern them properly without the aid of the teacher.*<sup>58</sup>

**“Whilst his teacher at the same time, by means of manipulation, will make the required readjustments and bring about the necessary co-ordinations”**

*The position of mechanical advantage, which may or may not be a normal position, is the position which gives the teacher the opportunity to bring about quickly with his own hands a co-ordinated condition in the subject.*<sup>59</sup>

*I am able to re-adjust and to teach others to re-adjust the human machine with the hands; to mould the body, as it were, into its proper shape, and with an open-minded pupil it is possible to remove many defects in a few minutes, as, for example, to change entirely the production of a voice, its quality and power.*<sup>60</sup>

*Now the narrowing and arching of the back already referred to are exactly opposite to what is required by nature, and to that which is obtained in re-education, co-ordination and readjustment, viz., widening of the back and a more normal and extended position of the spine. Moreover, if these conditions of the back be first secured, the neck and arms will no longer be stiffened, and the other faults will be eradicated.*<sup>61</sup>



*Plainly, attention must first be given to straightening and lengthening the curved and shortened spine. This can be done by an expert manipulator who is able to diagnose the erroneous preconceived ideas of the person concerned, and cause the pupil to inhibit them while employing the position of mechanical advantage.*<sup>62</sup>

**“...performing for the pupil the particular movement or movements required, and giving him the new reliable sensory appreciation and the very best opportunity possible to connect the different guiding orders before attempting to put them into practice”**

*My efforts were devoted to obtaining the correct action of the arm with the minimum of tension. This was done by manipulation and by giving him guiding orders which brought about the correct use of the parts concerned.*<sup>63</sup>

*The perceptions and sensations of all who need respiratory and physical re-education are, as I shall show later, absolutely unreliable. It is the teacher who should have the responsibility of certain detailed orders, the literal carrying out of which will ensure for the pupil what is then the correct standing position for him.*<sup>64</sup>

*[W]e should not allow the subject to try to “walk properly” until he had been given, by expert manipulation, correct experiences in the general use of the psycho-physical mechanisms, and had become well acquainted with the correct guiding and controlling orders which would assist in the securing of the means whereby he should use the mechanisms in any attempt to walk properly.*<sup>65</sup>

*The pupil should recall and give himself these new guiding orders, whilst the teacher, by means of his manipulation, assists him to secure the correct readjustment and co-ordination (the desired “end”), thus ensuring a series of satisfactory experiences which should be repeated until the bad habits are eradicated and the new and correct experiences replace them and become established.*<sup>66</sup>

**“The misuses must be diagnosed by the instructor, who may be called upon to use considerable ingenuity and patience in correcting the faults, and substituting the correct mental orders for the one general order which starts the old train of vicious habitual movements”**

*It is important to note here that the imperfectly co-ordinated person tends to shorten the stature and pull the head back in*



making this movement forward. Unless, therefore, the pupil remembers this subconscious tendency to shorten, and attends to the new directive orders which will counteract this subconscious tendency, his old habit will prove too strong for him, and at the first touch from the teacher to bring his body forward, though this touch may be so light that it would not move an inch-thick pineboard of the same length and width as the torso of the pupil, the latter will start to move forward at a ratio of, say, seventy-five per cent subconscious response to his old habit, and only twenty-five per cent conscious response to the new directive and guiding orders. This latter estimate is, in most cases, too liberal a one, for, as a rule, the slightest touch releases the old sensory activities associated subconsciously in the pupil's conception with the act of "moving forward," this being an "end" which the pupil, in spite of all warnings to the contrary, has already decided upon, and he becomes so dominated by the idea of "moving forward" (his "end"), that the new conscious directive orders are no longer projected. Instead, the old subconscious directive orders associated with his bad habits and with his unreliable sensory appreciation hold sway, and so, in the place of ordering his neck to relax, his head forward and up, in order to secure the necessary lengthening, he will actually throw his head back, stiffen his neck, and tend to shorten his spine by unduly curving it, in accordance with his old fixed habit in moving forward. These particular faults are accompanied, more or less, by an undue and incorrect tension of the legs and other parts of the organism, and also by a stiffening at the hip joints, the defective use of the parts culminating in an expenditure of energy out of all proportion to the requirements of the evolution.

When this happens, the teacher must point out to the pupil that he has not quite comprehended what is required of him, and he must again place the whole position before the pupil, and from as many angles as possible, until he is certain that the pupil understands that the primary orders which he is asked to give are preventive orders, and that if he gives these preventive orders (inhibition of the old misdirected activities), and then proceeds to give the new ones, his spine will be kept at its greatest possible length (not shortened), while the body will be moved forward from the hips easily and satisfactorily, without interfering with the generally relative position of the torso (except in the matter of angle), just as a door moves on its hinges.<sup>67</sup>

**"I cause him to rehearse the correct guiding orders, and after placing him in a position of mechanical advantage I am able by my manipulation to bring about, directly or indirectly as the case may be, the desired flexibility and extension"**

*The placing of the pupil in what would ordinarily be considered an abnormal position (of mechanical advantage) affords the teacher an opportunity to establish the mental and physical guiding principles which enable the pupil after a short time to repeat the co-ordination with the same perfection in a normal position.*<sup>68</sup>

**"The process is of course repeated until the pupil gains a new kinaesthetic sense of the new and correct use of the parts, which become properly co-ordinated"**

*When the teacher is satisfied that the pupil is giving due attention to the directive orders up to this point, and has gained a due appreciation of their relative value as primary, secondary, and following factors; when, also, the correct sensory experiences, made possible by the teacher's help in the way of readjustment and re-education, have been sufficiently repeated, the pupil can be taken a step farther in the evolution.*<sup>69</sup>



*The reconditioning process will include a continuous raising of the standard of reliability of his sense of feeling, so that in time he will find it almost as difficult to revert to the old habitual manner of use which once felt right, as it was at the beginning of his lessons to employ the new and better manner of use which, at that time, despite all the help given him by his teacher, still felt wrong.*<sup>70</sup>

THE ROLE OF THE PUPIL IN LEARNING  
(WHILE THE TEACHER GIVES A HANDS-ON LESSON)

This journal article emphasizes the use of the hands, but by no means assumes that *only* the hands are necessary for the pupil to progress from a beginning to an advanced and independent stage of learning. The hands are important,

but, according to Marjorie Barlow's account of Alexander, not the most important:

*F.M. never told us that the hands were the most important thing. He'd say they're important, how you touch a person, it's very, very important, because the human touch is the most potent stimulus you can give anybody, he used to say that.*<sup>71</sup>

We must remember that hands-on teaching fits into the whole pedagogy he evolved, which includes observation, diagnosis, imitation, demonstration, communication—both verbal and written—and repetition. He also engaged the pupil's thinking.

The preceding quotations have emphasized the teacher's role. The following quotations place more emphasis on the pupil's stages of learning and the changing balance of responsibility as teacher and pupil collaborate in the lesson—the teacher continuing to put hands on the pupil and the pupil learning to inhibit and direct.

#### Stages of learning

Alexander stated that a pupil should not take on responsibility for inhibition and direction in early lessons, but gradually would learn to project the directions for himself during a lesson and, ultimately, become proficient at doing so while carrying out daily life activities outside the lesson time. Alexander never delineated exact stages of learning, but in the next passage, he grouped learning into three phases, emphasizing that attending to the means-whereby was essential at all stages of instruction:

- (1) *whether the pupil is in the early stages of his work, where he is asked merely to give orders and to leave the carrying-out of these orders to the teacher;*
- (2) *whether he has reached a later stage where, under his teacher's supervision, he is gradually developing a reliable sensory appreciation upon which he can rely in carrying out the orders himself; or*
- (3) *whether he is working by himself at his ordinary activities outside.*<sup>72</sup>

The next three sets of quotations describe the progress of a pupil over time. I have added in brackets the stages as Alexander states them above, i.e., "Early Stage," "Later Stage," and "Carrying out the Orders by Himself Stage."

[Early Stage] *[O]nce the pupil has inhibited the instinctive misdirection leading to his faulty habitual use, the teacher must begin the process of building up the new use by giving the pupil the primary direction towards the establishment of this primary control. The pupil will then project this direction whilst the teacher with his hands brings about the corresponding activity, the combined procedure securing for the pupil the new experience of use which is desired. This experience, though unfamiliar at first, will become familiar with repetition...*

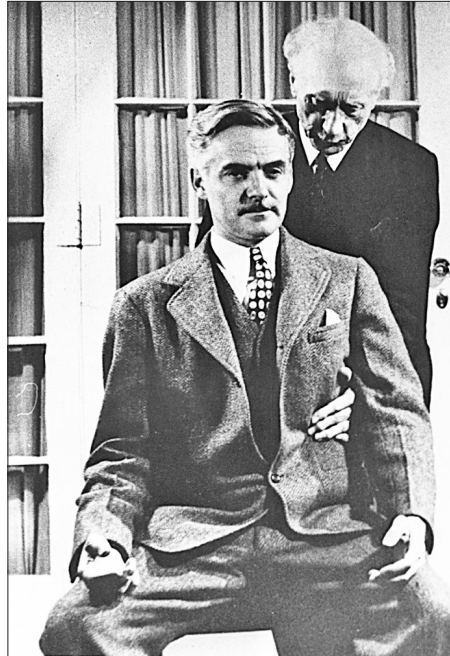
[Later Stage] *As long as teacher and pupil continue to work together on these lines, never deviating in their procedure from the "means-whereby" principle, they will in time establish in the pupil the desired direction of the use of his mechanisms, and this procedure has only to be repeated until the experiences associated with it have become familiar for the new and satisfactory use to become established in all his activity.*

[Carrying Out the Orders by Himself Stage] *When this stage is reached, it will be found that the improvement in the pupil's manner of use is associated with an improvement in his standard of functioning, and that undesirable specific symptoms, such as unsatisfactory use of the eyes, have disappeared in the process.*<sup>73</sup>

[Early Stage] *I then asked him to project these directions whilst I with my hands gave him the new sensory experiences of use corresponding to these directions, [Later Stage] in order that the trustworthiness of his sensory appreciation in relation to the use of his mechanisms might be gradually restored, [Carrying Out the Orders by Himself Stage] and that by this means he might in time acquire a register of the due amount of tension required for speaking, as distinct from the undue amount of tension associated with his stuttering.*<sup>74</sup>

[Early Stage] *When the subject is more or less familiar with these inhibitory experiences, we go on to give him a knowledge of the new and correct directive and guiding orders which, with the aid of manipulation, are to bring about the satisfactory use of the mechanisms in a sitting, prone, or other position. These*

*experiences must be repeated until [Later Stage] the new and reliable sensory appreciation becomes established, by which time there will have taken place an actual change in the use of the psycho-physical mechanisms of the organism in general, making for a satisfactory condition of co-ordination and adjustment. [Carrying Out the Orders by Himself Stage] When the required improvement in the general co-ordinations and adjustments has been secured, the processes we have outlined will be more or less in conscious operation, and a corresponding improvement in equilibrium in walking will be the result.*<sup>75</sup>



**Collaboration: the pupil mentally engages (by attending, inhibiting, and directing)**

Alexander's written record reiterates that the pupil progresses from a passive stage of learning while leaving himself alone to a more advanced stage in which he understands the directions and can inhibit and direct independently. The hands certainly play a significant role, especially in the early stages of learning. The experience that the hands provide, however, is a means-whereby, not the end in itself. For these experiences to contribute to any lasting benefit in the pupil, the experience must be linked with the mental orders. As the pupil's use, coordination, and understanding improve, he will learn to work consciously and not rely on the teacher.

These next quotations stress the need for the pupil to participate actively in the learning process by inhibiting and directing while the teacher continues to give hands-on instruction:

[G]iven:

- (1) *the teacher's knowledge of the correct means whereby the particular "end" can be secured;*
- (2) *the pupil's correct apprehension and conscious repetition of the guiding orders or directions relating to these "means-whereby";*
- (3) *the manipulation by the teacher, who, with his expert hands, gives to the pupil the reliable sensory appreciation which should result from such directive orders,*

*it is then merely a matter of time\* before the desired end will be secured.*<sup>76</sup>

*I then explain to him that his own will (not mine or some higher will) is to effect the desired change, but that it must first be directed in a rational way to bring about a physical manifestation, and must be aided by a simple mechanical principle and a proper manipulation.*<sup>77</sup>

*It must here be clearly understood that in the previous manipulative and other work done in connection with the technique, the pupil will have been made familiar in theory and practice with Order 1 ["order the neck to relax"]. He is able to give certain orders correctly and also to put them into effect.*<sup>78</sup>



[H]e will make the decision to refuse to give consent to carry out the activity by that habitual use of himself which is in accord with his conception of HOW the act should be performed. By adhering to this decision the pupil inhibits his immediate response, and therefore cuts off at its source his habitual reaction to the stimulus of the teacher's request, and the way is thus cleared for the teacher to help him to employ new means whereby he can gain his end by a new and improved manner of use, the responsibility for the pupil's being wrong or right in the employment of these means being the teacher's responsibility alone.<sup>79</sup>

The pupil must be made to realize clearly that this involves no action whatever on his part, but that he need only remember the correct inhibiting orders and employ them in accordance with definite instructions. When he does this it at once results in the freeing of his jaw, enabling me to move it for him with my hand. This gives him for the first time the correct kinæsthetic sense in connection with the action of his jaw and makes it clear once and for all to him that the desired action is perfectly and easily possible.<sup>80</sup>

[T]he whole purpose of the re-educatory method I advocate is to bring back these muscles into play, not by physical exercises, but by the employment of a position of mechanical advantage and the repetition of the correct inhibiting and guiding mental orders by the pupil, and the correct manipulation and direction by the teacher, until the two psycho-physical factors become an established psycho-physical habit.<sup>81</sup>

I would emphasize here that the process of eradicating any such defect as stuttering by these means makes the greatest demands on the time, patience and skill of both teacher and pupil, since, as we have seen, it calls for

- (1) the inhibition of the instinctive direction of energy associated with familiar sensory experiences of wrong habitual use, and
- (2) the building up in its place of a conscious direction of energy through the repetition of unfamiliar sensory experiences associated with new and satisfactory use.<sup>82</sup>

The teacher, having decided upon the orders necessary for the elongation of the spine, the freedom of the neck (i.e. requisite natural laxness), and other conditions desirable for the case in hand, will then ask the pupil to rehearse those orders mentally. . . . [H]e will rely upon the pupil mentally rehearsing the orders necessary to maintain and improve the conditions present, while he, with the other hand placed upon the pupil's shoulder, causes the body gradually to incline backwards until its weight is taken by the back of the chair.<sup>83</sup>

[T]he practical help that the teacher is able to give him places him in a totally new position in regard to his "difficulty"; so that all he has to do is to stop trying to overcome his difficulty "his way," and, instead, to remember and follow out the new instructions, by which means he will obtain the result he desires.<sup>84</sup>

I have had some of the biggest minds through my hands and none of you want anything mental really. All that's worrying you is whether what I ask you to do will bring about what I tell you it will bring about.<sup>85</sup>

I make them endeavour to exercise their conscious minds all the while.<sup>86</sup>

«If he thought I was thinking well enough, he'd make it more difficult and give just a little less support than I needed.»  
Peggy Williams

The brain of both pupil and teacher are at work the whole time.<sup>87</sup>

"You're not thinking connectedly."<sup>88</sup>

"You know, Anthony, we'd like to see a little bit more thought coming from you!"<sup>89</sup>

The following quotations from Alexander's pupils also show that Alexander expected and reminded his pupils to participate in the learning process:



I notice that Alexander keeps giving my knees a gentle tap to remind me not to stiffen them unduly and not to hold them rigid. He also taps my ribs to remind me to keep them moving. (Miss G.R.)<sup>90</sup>

An occasional tap on the neck or knee as a reminder not to stiffen. (Erika Whittaker)<sup>91</sup>

If he thought I was thinking well enough, he'd make it more difficult and give just a little less support than I needed. (Peggy Williams)<sup>92</sup>

In the next quotation, a pupil describes the first, exciting moment when she successfully carried out the orders by herself and got out of the chair without Alexander's hands:

Towards the end of the lesson Alexander put his fingertips, only two of them, at the base of my head, and I stood up like a breeze. Then he asked me to stand up again, and again, and each time I got up better than I had ever done in my life. . . . Alexander said, "I don't know whether you know, but you did the last two all by yourself. I didn't help you in any way. I kept my finger-tips an inch away from your neck." Marvel of marvels, I got up out of a chair all by myself for the first time in years—"did it twice". That was a red letter day. (Miss G.R.)<sup>93</sup>



### The teacher's expertise

Alexander used the phrases "expert manipulation," "expert manipulator," and "expert hands." That is to say, it is not just a hand moving a body that makes a difference, but a well-trained hand. The next quotation indicates that the use of skilled, trained hands can bring meaning to verbal concepts:

*In the technical evolution about to be set down it is necessary to use certain phrases employed in the teaching technique, phrases which I consider call for comment, seeing that they do not always adequately express my meaning and that, furthermore, they cannot be defended as being demonstrably accurate....*

*I think them inadequate, but with a teacher present to demonstrate in person what he means by them, they serve their purpose.<sup>94</sup>*

In fact, the teacher's use of his whole self contributes to the changes in the pupil:

*"Why, Mr. Binkley, when I am teaching you, as I do now, I am able to convey to you what I want to convey, because as I touch you, and guide you with my hands in carrying out my instructions, I, myself, am going up! up! up!"<sup>95</sup>*

The teacher's expertise may also lessen the time it takes for the pupil to develop reliable sensory appreciation and improved coordination:

*To anyone who accepts these points and sees the reason for keeping them in view whilst working to principle in employing the technique, I would say: "Go ahead, but remember that time is of the essence of the contract." It took me years to reach a point that can be reached in a few weeks with the aid of any experienced teacher.<sup>96</sup>*

George Coghill also wrote that a competent teacher helps the pupil learn more quickly than if here were working by himself:

*[T]he proprioceptive system can be brought under conscious control, and can be educated to carry to the motor centres the stimulus which is responsible for the muscular activity which brings about the manner of working (use) of the mechanism of correct posture. Of course the time required for this education could be greatly lessened through the assistance of a competent teacher.<sup>97</sup>*

Walter Carrington, himself renowned in the Alexander community for his teaching skills and probably the teacher with the longest ongoing relationship with Alexander in the teaching studio, emphasized the need for the hands to provide a quality experience to be effective:

*It was that skill of his that really counted, because I came to give her lessons after Alexander had died, and I had seen what he could manage. It was a pretty sobering sort of demonstration to me of how little I could manage by comparison....*

*[T]he crucial thing was what FM was able to do for her with his hands. This and the fact that any amount of lecturing and explanation would have failed to produce any significant change. So, once again from my experience and observation, there is no doubt in my mind that it is the quality of the experience that the teacher is able to transmit, eventually, that is the vital and necessary ingredient.<sup>98</sup>*

### DISCUSSION AND QUESTIONS

Based on my research as provided above, Alexander used his hands for the benefit of the pupil's learning, whether the pupil (a) did not realize that his sensory appreciation was faulty, (b) was convinced of the need to improve it, or (c) was deeply engaged in the learning process. The research also showed that Alexander used hands-on instruction to offer a means for the teacher to:

- observe or recognize the problems of incorrect sensory appreciation while the pupil is in action;
- alert the pupil to the problems of faulty sensory awareness and give him a new sensory experience;
- cultivate in the pupil, by using expert manipulation,

performing particular movements for the pupil, and making required readjustments, new and reliable sensory appreciation while simultaneously giving guiding orders or directions so that coordination can improve;

- give the pupil a means whereby to prevent misdirected activities;
- repeat the process until the pupil's coordination has improved.

#### 1. Sensory appreciation

The need to address the problem of faulty sensory appreciation is a dominant theme in the passages cited in this paper. In these next quoted paragraphs, Alexander suggested that the issue of sensory appreciation cannot be solved by words alone. I have put key passages in bold:

*[F]or in this sphere of sensory appreciation, the most difficult problem to be solved, in most cases, is concerned with the matter of developing a correct register of the due and proper amount of so-called "muscular tension" necessary at a given time....*

*The question, then, of dealing with the matter of a correct or incorrect degree of "physical tension" is probably, from the teacher's point of view, the most difficult problem to be solved in the scheme that we are considering. It is clear that this problem cannot be solved by the technique involved in the performance of "physical exercises" as such, and the chief danger involved in the performance of exercises associated with systems of physical culture, posture, etc., lies in the fact that this fundamental difficulty concerned with muscular tension has been ignored. If ever a plan*



*of development by means of exercises to be performed according to written or spoken instructions—minus manipulative help—is to be evolved, this problem will have to be satisfactorily solved.*<sup>99</sup>

*I ask those readers therefore, who are anxious to teach themselves... We cannot do this securely while relying for guidance on “feeling” and the will-to-do motivated by instincts, many of which have outgrown their usefulness, and which are associated with untrustworthy experiences which “feel right”.... [T]hey will not be following me unless they recognize:*

- (1) *that knowledge concerned with sensory experience cannot be conveyed by the written or spoken word.*<sup>100</sup>

Here Alexander advocated for the necessity of using the hands vis à vis developing reliable sensory appreciation:

*[M]anipulation is necessary for the development and establishment of reliable sensory appreciation in the case of individuals who have developed defects, because in everything they are doing themselves by the usual methods to remedy these defects, they are guiding themselves by an unreliable sense of feeling, thus adding to the incorrect experiences which must always result from guidance by unreliable sensory appreciation.*<sup>101</sup>

This paper does not consider group teaching, but we know that Alexander gave lecture demonstrations, and his teacher training took place in groups. It is interesting to note that Alexander did not believe that the problem of unreliable sensory appreciation could be dealt with through a group process, no doubt because individuals would receive little or no experience of hands-on instruction:

*The mass is made up of individuals, and reliable sensory appreciation cannot be given on the mass-teaching principle or by precept or exhortation.*<sup>102</sup>

Walter Carrington wrote similarly about group teaching:

*The new experience comes fairly quickly at the hands of a teacher: it is the understanding that takes the time....It cannot easily be taught collectively because of the need of the actual experience at the teacher's hands.*<sup>103</sup>

Do teachers who instruct without hands use other tools to supply the pupil's needs in the area of developing a reliable sensory appreciation? If so, what are they?

## 2. Teaching the meaning of directions

Alexander wrote many times of the need for the pupil to repeat the guiding orders or directions. He cautioned that there could be difficulty in connecting the words of the directions with the kinesthetic meaning of the words, but that the use of the hands would help.

*How do teachers help pupils understand the meaning of the directions without the use of the hands? For instance, how does one teach “head forward and up” without the hands and avoid the pitfalls of the pupil trying to put the head into a certain position?*

## 3. Observing and feeling changes in the pupil

Through his hands, the teacher gives the pupil new sensory experiences and also receives sensory feedback about the pupil. Without the hands, the teacher can observe visually or rely on the pupil's verbal feedback. I have learned that some teachers observe changes in the pupil's coloration or dilation of the eyes. It would be helpful to discover whether those changes correlate with changes in sensory experience or coordination that the teacher observes with the hands.

How do teachers who do not use their hands observe changes in their pupils?

## 4. The time it takes to learn the Technique (and improve coordination)

Working by himself, Alexander solved his problem and developed a technique as the means to change his poor habits. It took him years of experimentation and dedication to figure out a process that worked for him and that he could

teach, and then he spent the rest of his life refining his teaching and continuing to work on himself. Alexander never said that one could not learn his technique by independent observation and experimentation as he had, but he did not expect that anyone would be willing or able to do that. He cautioned:

*The right thing to do would be the last thing we should do left to ourselves, because it would be the last thing we should think would be the right thing to do.*<sup>104</sup>

Alexander also stated:

*Anyone can do what I do, IF they will do what I did. But none of you want the discipline.*<sup>105</sup>

Having figured out how to change habits and improve his own coordination through a lengthy and difficult process, he continued to refine his work throughout his life (“I never stop working, I dare not.”<sup>106</sup>). Utilizing the method he had developed, Alexander taught others in a shorter period what had taken him so long to achieve. Alexander and Coghill both wrote that hands-on teaching would shorten the amount of time it would take to learn this technique.

Can pupils advance as effectively and quickly if they do not receive hands-on instruction?

## 5. Responsibility and dependency through stages of learning

Walter Carrington pointed out that the process of receiving hands-on while learning is different from the steps Alexander took on his own:

*The technique, as taught, inevitably differs from the sequence of Alexander's own experiments; for it was through observation that he came to understanding and so to a new experience. We have the experience first, at the hands of a teacher, and the observation and understanding follow only gradually.*<sup>107</sup>

Having hands-on instruction during the first lessons may at times slow the pace of learning. This can occur if the pupil does not understand his responsibility as a learner. I am thinking in particular about the strong stimulus the pupil receives from the teacher's



hands, a stimulus that may be a very pleasurable experience but that seduces the pupil into dependency upon the teacher's hands to recreate sensation. In this situation, some pupils continue to passively allow the teacher to do the work and do not learn to take on responsibility for inhibiting or directing. Under these circumstances, hands-on instruction can retard the intended progression towards growth and independence, but it is remedied when the teacher clearly teaches the pupil about the changing level of responsibility that occurs during a course of lessons.

Even teachers who are committed to hands-on instruction have noticed the problem that can arise from receiving really fine hands-on work, as Michael Frederick explained:

*It used to frustrate me when I would hear teachers say, "Get hands on right away, give them that experience." You have to be careful with that, because sometimes you get teachers whose directions are phenomenal, like Peggy Williams, and you can't wait to go for a lesson to have Peggy put hands on. But it's not that I couldn't wait to go to Peggy to learn to work on myself; that wasn't my intention. My intention was to get that feel-good experience. And I think that's a trap in the Alexander world.<sup>108</sup>*

For the pupil to progress from being contented with a "feel-good experience," the teacher must clarify the pupil's role and be careful not to encourage ongoing dependency. The teacher must steer the pupil toward sharing as much psycho-physical responsibility as possible at any given moment. The pupil must understand that the very same mental activities of inhibition and direction that are encouraged during hands-on lessons will be necessary to apply the Technique independently. Both teacher and pupil must understand their respective roles and expectations during lessons to avoid confusion.

It might seem appealing to some teachers to attempt to avoid this issue by not using the hands at all. If this is so, what is gained, and what is lost?

#### CONCLUSION

This article presented research on the hands-on technique that F.M. Alexander used with his pupils. It included a history of when and why Alexander began to use his hands; impressions of his hands-on work from some of his pupils; and a collection of quotations addressing the role of the hands in teaching, the pupil's role in learning, and the need for the pupil to advance towards carrying on the work independently.

It also raised some questions:

- Do teachers who instruct without hands use other means to supply the pupil's needs in the area of developing a reliable sensory appreciation? If so, what are they?

- How does one teach "head forward and up" without the hands and avoid the pitfalls of the pupil trying to put the head into a specific position?
- How do teachers who do not use their hands observe changes in their pupils?
- Can pupils advance as effectively and quickly if they do not receive hands-on instruction?
- What is lost and what is gained by not using the hands?

If the hands are not part of the instruction, what are the substitute provisions for dealing with these issues? Teachers who do not use their hands still need to address the problem of sensory appreciation and the challenge of conveying meaning to the directions. Also, the hands-off teacher cannot utilize sensory feedback from the hands to observe the pupil.

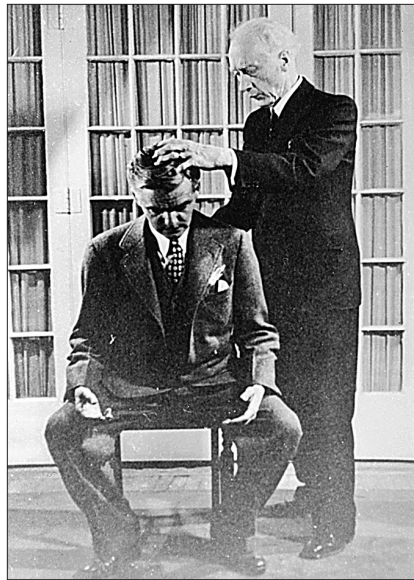
Alexander agreed that it would be possible to learn his technique without the teacher's hands but that "time is of the essence." Not everyone is capable of undertaking the multi-year challenge Alexander faced without assistance. His description of his process of experimentation and observation in the chapter "Evolution of a Technique" in *The Use of the Self*<sup>109</sup> shows that he failed many times before he discovered inhibition. Because Alexander evolved his teaching method, others do not have to go through such a long or lonely period of discovery. Throughout his lifetime, he was reported to have taught as many as fifteen thousand pupils.<sup>110</sup> Surely that accumulation of experience gives us reason to rely on his methods.

Hands-off online instruction is neither the same as a process of individual scientific experimentation such as Alexander undertook nor hands-on teaching. The questions I have raised remain, and, until those questions are answered—and I welcome hearing from teachers—the research and consideration that led to

this paper support my original assumption: the Alexander Technique is best delivered as a hands-on method. The need to improve sensory appreciation is essential to improve coordination, and using the hands to give new sensory experiences is the way to provide those experiences.

There may be reasons, nevertheless, to offer hands-off instruction over the internet. Certainly, teachers on the internet can in some ways offer support and guidance to pupils who have no access to a certified teacher. Perhaps a pupil receiving internet assistance has an advantage over someone who works entirely on his own. I feel that as teachers interested in lifelong learning, it behooves us to continue to discuss and determine how different approaches help, to what degree, and perhaps, for what individual populations. Then we need to be clear with ourselves and our prospective pupils about the services we provide.

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« [A]s I touch you,  
and guide you with my hands  
in carrying out my instructions,  
I, myself, am going  
up! up! up! »  
F.M. Alexander



## NOTES

- 1 F.M. Alexander used the word *pupil* to refer to private students and used masculine pronouns to refer to any gender. For consistency, I have done the same in this paper.
- 2 In contemporary times, Alexander Technique teachers avoid using the term “manipulation,” but Alexander used it regularly. In his later books, Alexander more often used the word “hand” (i.e., “to give him with my hands the experience he needed for improving the employment of his primary control.” See F. Matthias Alexander, “The Constant Influence of Manner of Use in Relation to Diagnosis and Disease,” in *The Universal Constant in Living (UCL)* (London: Mouritz, [1941], 2000), 27. In this article, assume that “manipulation” refers to the same gentle, non-doing style of hands-on work that teachers learn in today’s training courses.
- 3 Frank Pierce Jones, *Freedom to Change* (London: Mouritz, [1976], 1997).
- 4 Michael Bloch, *F.M.: The Life of Frederick Matthias Alexander, Founder of the Alexander Technique* (London: Little, Brown, 2004), 43.
- 5 J.A. Evans, *Frederick Matthias Alexander: A Family History* (Chichester, UK: Phillimore & Co, 2001), 107–109.
- 6 John Nicholls, in discussion with author, New York, May 24, 2018, recording and transcript held by author.
- 7 Walter Carrington and Seán Carey, *Personally Speaking: Walter Carrington on the Alexander Technique* (London: Mouritz, 2001), 12.
- 8 Jones, *Freedom*, 18.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 F.M. Alexander, “Re-education of the Kinæsthetic Systems,” in *Articles and Lectures (A & L)* (London: Mouritz, [1894–1950], 1995), 82–83.
- 11 Jones, *Freedom*, 31.
- 12 Lulie Westfeldt, *F. Matthias Alexander: The Man and His Work* (Westport, CT: Associated Booksellers, 1964), 61.
- 13 Irene Tasker, *Connecting Links, talk given at the Constructive Teaching Centre, October 9, 1967* (Florence, MA: NASTAT, c. 1968), 7.
- 14 Carrington and Carey, *Personally Speaking*, 12.
- 15 Evans, *A Family History*, 231.
- 16 Walter Carrington and Dilys Carrington, *An Evolution of the Alexander Technique: Selected Writings* (London: The Sheildrake Press, 2017), 170.
- 17 Carrington and Carey, *Personally Speaking*, 24–25.
- 18 *F.M. Alexander 1949–1950* with commentary by Walter Carrington (London: Mouritz, 2010), DVD. The short teaching segment is repeated three times while Walter Carrington gives a different voice-over narration with each repetition.
- 19 F. Matthias Alexander, “Education and Re-education,” in *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual (CCC)* (London: Mouritz, [1923] 2004), 70.
- 20 F. Matthias Alexander, “The Processes of Conscious Guidance and Control,” *Man’s Supreme Inheritance (MSI)* (London: Mouritz, [1910] 1996), 133. The word “extension” in this context most likely means “lengthening.”
- 21 Alexander, “Uncontrolled Emotions and Fixed Prejudices,” *CCC*, 139.
- 22 Alexander, “Illustration,” *CCC*, 113.
- 23 Alexander, “Bedford College Lecture,” *A & L*, 176.
- 24 Alexander, “Man’s Evolutionary Development,” *CCC*, 63.
- 25 Hugh Massey, *An African Odyssey: Posture, Human Evolution and the Technique of F.M. Alexander* (Bristol, England: Herbert Adler Publishing, 2001), 95–96.
- 26 Louise Morgan, *Inside Yourself* (London: Mouritz, [1954], 2016).
- 27 Ibid., 27. Alexander is probably questioning a person’s ability to understand, not one’s literacy per se. He has an aphorism that also speaks to this: “Be careful of the printed matter: you may not read it as it is written down.” See Alexander, “Teaching Aphorisms,” *A & L*, 206.
- 28 Morgan, *Inside Yourself*, 8–9.
- 29 Jean M.O. Fischer, ed. *A Means to an End: Articles and Letters on the Alexander Technique 1909–1955* (London, Mouritz, 2015), 6.
- 30 Jean M.O. Fischer, ed. *The Philosopher’s Stone* (London: Mouritz, 1988), 17.
- 31 Ibid., 36.
- 32 Ibid., 67–68.
- 33 Westfeldt, *The Man*, 39–40.
- 34 Fiona Robb, *Not to ‘Do’: An Account of Lessons in the Alexander Technique with Margaret Goldie* (London: Camon Press, 1999), 44.
- 35 Peggy Williams, foreword to *Explaining the Alexander Technique: The Writings of F. Matthias Alexander*, by Walter Carrington and Seán Carey (London: The Sheildrake Press, 1992), ix.
- 36 Nanette Walsh, *Unsmudged: An Encounter with Peggy Williams, a First-Generation Teacher of the Alexander Technique* (Amherst, MA: Off the Common Press, 2018), 38.
- 37 Elisabeth Walker, *Forward and Away: Memoirs* (Norfolk, Great Britain: Gavin R. Walker, 2008), 57.
- 38 Ruth Rootberg, *Living the Alexander Technique* (Amherst, MA: Off the Common Press, 2015), 94.
- 39 Massey, *African Odyssey*, 77.
- 40 Goddard Binkley, *The Expanding Self: How the Alexander Technique Changed My Life* (London: STAT Books, 1993), 38.
- 41 Alexander, “Supplement to Re-Education of the Kinæsthetic Systems Concerned with the Development of Robust Physical Well-Being,” *A & L*, 103–105.
- 42 Alexander, “Illustration,” *CCC*, 114–122.
- 43 Alexander, “Imperfect Sensory Appreciation,” *CCC*, 99–100.
- 44 Alexander, “The Process of Conscious Guidance and Control,” *MSI*, 131–133. Footnote for “harmful rigidity\*”: “A very notable though trivial instance of mental ‘rigidity’ was brought to me by a pupil while writing these pages. A fireman on duty at a theatre had neglected to unbolt the escape doors. When severely reprimanded he pleaded that he had been instructed by an assistant manager to do duty in another part of the theatre at the time he usually opened the escapes. The following night the assistant manager instructed him to make the same change in his routine, on which the man pleaded, ‘Don’t ask me to do that, sir. I forgot the escapes last night and I am sure to forget ‘em again if you make me go that way round. You see, sir, I’ve gone round the other way so long that if I make a change I seem to lose my memory.’”
- 45 Alexander, “Conscious Guidance and Control: Apprehension and Re-education,” *MSI*, 159.
- 46 Alexander, “Sensory Appreciation in its Relation to Man’s Evolutionary Development,” *CCC*, 26.
- 47 Alexander, “Imperfect Sensory Appreciation,” *CCC*, 98.

- Footnote for “the connection\*”: “The recognition of this vital connection marks the point of departure between methods of teaching on a conscious and on a subconscious basis.”
- 48 Westfeldt, *The Man*, 36.
- 49 Alexander, “Incorrect Conception,” *CCC*, 83.
- 50 Alexander, “Sensory Appreciation in its Relation to Happiness,” *CCC*, 189–190. Footnote for “understand\*”: “Of course the teacher’s manipulation will have given him previously the reliable sensory appreciation in this connection.”
- 51 F.M. Alexander, “The Golfer Who Cannot Keep His Eyes on the Ball,” *The Use of the Self (UoS)* (London: Orion, [1932] 2001), 68–69. Footnote after “generally\*”: “For instance, with the improvement in his use he will become aware of an increase in the expansion and contraction of the thorax, ie, of the degree of thoracic mobility. Reliability of the sensory register is essential to all who would make permanent changes from unsatisfactory to satisfactory conditions of functioning”
- 52 Alexander, “Primitive Remedies and Their Defects,” *MSI*, 15.
- 53 Alexander, “Apprehension and Re-education,” *MSI*, 158.
- 54 Alexander, “Education and Re-education,” *CCC*, 81.
- 55 Alexander, part of footnote in “Sensory Appreciation and its Relation to Happiness,” *CCC*, 190.
- 56 Alexander, “Diagnosis and Medical Training,” *UoS*, 97.
- 57 Alexander, “The Constant Influence of Manner of Use in Relation to Change,” *UCL*, 82.
- 58 Alexander, “The Processes of Conscious Guidance and Control,” *MSI*, 139.
- 59 Alexander, “Synopsis of Claim,” *MSI*, 118.
- 60 Alexander, “Synopsis of Claim,” *MSI*, 119.
- 61 Alexander, “Notes and Instances,” *MSI*, 170.
- 62 *Ibid.*, 184.
- 63 Alexander, “The Processes of Conscious Guidance and Control,” *MSI*, 135.
- 64 Alexander, “Why ‘Deep Breathing’ and Physical Culture Exercises Do More Harm than Good,” *A&L*, 74.
- 65 Alexander, “Psycho-physical Equilibrium,” *CCC*, 152.
- 66 Alexander, “Respiratory Mechanisms,” *CCC*, 132.
- 67 Alexander, “Illustration,” *CCC*, 115–116.
- 68 Alexander, “Synopsis of Claims,” *MSI*, 119.
- 69 Alexander, “Illustration,” *CCC*, 116.
- 70 Alexander, “The Constant Influence of Manner of Use in Relation to Diagnosis and Disease,” *UCL*, 40.
- 71 Trevor Alan Davies, *An Examined Life: Marjorie Barlow and the Alexander Technique* (Berkeley: Mornum Time Press, 2002), 226.
- 72 Alexander, “Imperfect Sensory Appreciation,” *CCC*, 106.
- 73 Alexander, “The Golfer,” *UoS*, 65–66.
- 74 Alexander, “The Stutterer,” *UoS*, 73.
- 75 Alexander, “Psycho-physical Equilibrium,” *CCC*, 153.
- 76 Alexander, “Imperfect Sensory Appreciation,” *CCC*, 101. Footnote for “time\*”: “In this connection the length of time that may be required in the process of re-education before the new and correct experiences can become established has proved a stumbling-block to some enquirers; but here again, if we reason the matter out, we shall see that the ability to break with habits that are sometimes very long-established must depend upon certain natural aptitudes and qualities in the pupil, and especially upon the standard of acuteness of his sense perceptions, and of the development of his ability to inhibit.”
- 77 Alexander, “The Processes of Conscious Guidance and Control,” *MSI*, 133.
- 78 Alexander, “Illustration,” *CCC*, 115.
- 79 Alexander, “The Constant Influence of Manner of Use in Relation to Change,” *UCL*, 79.
- 80 Alexander, “The Processes of Conscious Guidance and Control,” *MSI*, 142–143.
- 81 Alexander, “Notes and Instances,” *MSI*, 185.
- 82 Alexander, “The Stutterer,” *UoS*, 84–85.
- 83 Alexander, footnote in “Synopsis of Claim,” *MSI*, 118.
- 84 Alexander, “Incorrect Conception,” *CCC*, 89–90.
- 85 Alexander, “Teaching Aphorisms,” *A&L*, 199.
- 86 Alexander, “The Processes of Conscious Guidance and Control,” *MSI*, 134.
- 87 *Ibid.*, 143.
- 88 Binkley, *Expanding Self*, 50.
- 89 Crissman Taylor and Carmen Tarnowski, *Taking Time: Six Interviews with First Generation Teachers of the Alexander Technique on Alexander Teacher Training*, ed. Chariclia Gounaris (Aarhus C, Denmark: Novis, 2000), 104.
- 90 Morgan, *Inside Yourself*, 11.
- 91 Erika Whittaker, “Alexander’s Way,” *The Alexander Journal*, n°13 (Autumn 1993): 3.
- 92 Walsh, *Unsmudged*, 45.
- 93 Morgan, *Inside Yourself*, 14–15.
- 94 Alexander, “Illustration,” *CCC*, 112.
- 95 Binkley, *Expanding Self*, 51.
- 96 Alexander, preface to new edition [1941], *UoS*, 20.
- 97 George Coghill, “Appreciation: The Educational Methods of F. Matthias Alexander,” *UCL*, xx.
- 98 Carrington, *Evolution*, 174.
- 99 Alexander, “Imperfect Sensory Appreciation,” *CCC*, 109–110.
- 100 Alexander, preface to new edition, *UoS*, 19.
- 101 Alexander, “Education and Re-education,” *CCC*, 82.
- 102 Alexander, “Incorrect Conception,” *CCC*, 97.
- 103 Carrington, *Evolution*, 17–18.
- 104 Alexander, “Teaching Aphorisms,” *A&L*, 203.
- 105 F.M. Alexander as quoted by Fr. Geoffrey Curtis, “The Alexander Principle and Some Spiritual Disciplines” in *More Talk of Alexander*, ed. Wilfred Barlow (London: Gollancz, 1978), 154. Marjory Barlow said it slightly differently: “But none of you want anything mental.” See Davies, *An Examined Life*, 284.
- 106 Marjory Barlow, “Recollections of My Uncle F.M. Alexander,” in *The Sydney Congress Papers*, ed. David Garlick (New South Wales, Australia: Direction, July 1994), 8.
- 107 Carrington, *Evolution*, 17.
- 108 Ruth Rootberg, *Living the Alexander Technique, Vol. 11: Aging with Poise* (Amherst, MA: Off the Common Press, 2018), 176.
- 109 Alexander, *UoS*, 21–48.
- 110 Morgan, *Inside Yourself*, 1.

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