

ALEXANDER A TECHNIQUE FOR TEENAGERS

Introduction “to discover new seas, we need to let go of the shore”

What is well being?

There has been so much talk over the last few years about well-being that we could all be forgiven for attributing totally different qualities to this rather dear old-fashioned word. People have said it is to do with the ability to give to other's, to feel trust in our society, our ability to be strong and optimistic about life to be fit to be emotionally intelligent. Of course these qualities and many others can all be component parts of well-being, and many different disciplines have a huge amount to offer in how to go about finding these qualities in our lives. In fact for most people it will usually be a jigsaw of several ideas that help put our lives and our selves into balance and a quick fix is not always long term. Alexander's technique and teaching has been contributing to these ways of finding well-being in peoples lives for over 100 years. So what does it especially have to offer? Well perhaps it is just that, a sense of balance of the whole of our selves. A sense of balance in the body which feels light but connected, a sense thereby of ease in the mind, the emotions and spirit. So not a static state, but a flexible one, with a way to think and learn being part of that order and state. It was Alexander's idea of unity that really distinguishes his work, that we really do always function as a psycho physical unity. So even our attitudes can make a difference to how we experience everything. Some lucky devils don't loose this easy light way of being, which most of us had when we were very little, but sadly lots of us do. Alexander's idea was that we all can choose to rediscover this use consciously, and use ourselves well. Move freely, breathe easily and think clearly, let go of our fears and discover our buoyancy and resilience to life's ups and downs. Well this then is real holistic education, which has the added benefit of helping us learn how to learn, so ideal for young people of all ages.

'Wrong' and 'failure' are synonymous in the minds of the young, and accordingly remain blocks to their development.

It can be tough being a teenager in today's world, there is so much to cope with, growth, pressure of school, exams, society, contemporaries and families. Many young people are in pain or just uncomfortable in their bodies. Some of today's teenagers are very unhappy, bored and some are also very angry.

These and so many other reasons are why teenagers can enjoy the benefits of working with the ideas and practical applications of the Alexander's work. This can range from getting better at doing things, to being more at ease in their bodies, and being able to change their mental and emotional states of being. This embodiment of the whole self that the work encourages and being able to let go of fears and tensions can come as a great relief and a real step towards self- confidence.

There are of course a lot of happy well- adjusted young people around who are funny, clever and often awesomely dedicated to what they are doing. In fact it is often talented youngsters who see the potential of the work right away. So this crowd can also get a lot from Alexander work. It helps all young people to address the idea of stimulus and response, and see that it is usually only our reaction to life that we can have much control over.

Alexander can work on so many levels. Some of the benefits can come very quickly and

some take a longer journey. I have worked with teenager's who have come to the work to improve their dancing, football, concentration or musical skills, all of which can be greatly helped with a bit of Alexander thinking. Then there are the young people who want to work on their feelings of stress or perhaps their relationships with friends and family or fear of performing in public. Some come at first just to fix an uncomfortable shoulder or hip, often Alexander can help quite quickly. However the great potential of Alexander is working on our self-development, self-confidence and awareness. We are able to be responsible for much more of our lives than we might have thought, this is good news for teenagers. It can be changing a mind- set that can make all the difference, " you can't solve a problem with the same mind set that created it", it can be recognising what puts you under pressure like time and learning to deal with it .

R.C.M.

In the 1950s Wilfred Barlow, an Alexander teacher practicing at no.3 Albert Court, was consulted by Joyce Woodman, a singing professor at the RCM. She became very interested in the potential of the technique in relation to singing. Joyce persuaded Wilfred to take part in an experiment at the college. Thirty seven singing students were given a course of thirty lessons each. The lessons were frequent at first and then spaced out to one or two a week. The students were assessed in various ways and conclusions were reached by the professors of the singing faculty.

All students grew in height bar one who grew greatly in width, who grew more modestly in width. The students became vocally more flexible and easier to teach. They became more capable of taking stage directions and some made dramatic changes in their voices which improved their career expectations. The final conclusion was that the 'Alexander Technique should become the basis of a student's education at the Royal college of Music.'

Some time after Barlow's experiment three teachers were appointed, one of them being the newly trained Joyce Woodman. Several music students went on to train as Alexander teachers after discovering the technique at the RCM. These glorious days were not to last. Pressure on the budget saw Alexander teachers retire and not replaced. The priorities had changed; Alexander was seen as esoteric knowledge rather than an ideal basis for the education of a musician. Perceptions of the technique in the community also became distorted by a general impression, gleaned from superficial contact with the technique, that it was about sitting up straight and having 'good posture' when getting in and out of chairs. In fact the technique is about movement, spontaneity and communication, all wonderful qualities in a performing musician.

In 1990 a new experiment was conducted by Peter Buckoke. All college students with names starting with 'A' and some of the 'B's were given a course of lessons. The feedback questionnaires were 100% positive and funding was found for an increase from one day to three full days of teaching. The students queued up for lessons and there was an awareness of the technique filtering through the whole student population.

A new idea started to develop, that of including AT in the degree. This came at another time of pressure on the budget and the RCM saw the possibility of funding more Alexander work by creating an academic module introducing the technique to all first years. This was soon in place and successful in stimulating a demand for more options. Level 2 sprung into life as an extension of level 1 developing the student's capacity to apply the technique to practice, performance and everyday life. In 2005 level 3 Alexander was born, twelve

students took the new course which looks at performance and communication in particular, deepening and refining the use of the technique in each student's particular area of interest.

Students on the level 1 and 2 courses have to keep self-observational diaries. Very often the final entry in a diary refers to how useful the discipline of keeping such a diary has been and an intention to continue. The diaries have to be finished off with a question, the idea of the question is encourage a deep curiosity and to see where a student has got to with their thinking. Level 2 includes observation of fellow students in a performing situation with suggestions of practice strategies. Level 3 includes three video recordings of each student, at the beginning, the end and a mock audition in the middle of the course. Interestingly, video seems to be a more powerful tool than using a mirror. All students agree that the video recordings are very useful, even though some don't like the idea initially.

In this recent period of re-flowering of the technique at the RCM, several students have gone on to train as Alexander teachers at the various training schools in England and abroad. Plans are developing for a more advanced, 'Masters' option which would provide a way for the level 3 students to continue their advanced studies. This would possibly be gaining credit towards an Alexander teacher qualification. This would be a very exciting development and would help train music specialist teachers ready to step into the breach when the music education world realises that the final conclusion of the original RCM experiment is the way forward.

There are now three Alexander teachers working at the RCM. Teaching is given on a variety of patterns, academic group work, paired or single times and specialist workshops for single instrument groups

What The Students say:

Ashok Klouda

Having elected to take the Alexander Technique course at the Royal College over the last two years, I would like to recommend it as strongly as possible to everyone. I would say that the course benefitted my development and music making to the same degree as my principal study lessons (which is not to say that these weren't fantastic, because they were absolutely top notch!). Through helping me gain a heightened level of awareness, the Alexander Technique has enabled me to feel freer in all the things I do and has given me the power to choose to change habits if I wish. This is obviously particularly valuable in the advanced study of music, where being stuck in the pattern of a bad habit (physical, mental or both) can stop you from communicating what you intend. On top of being extremely interesting and beneficial to one's playing, I would also recommend it because it is a lot of fun!"

Nickolas Prozzillo

Prior to embarking on my masters course at the Royal College of Music, I knew very little about the Alexander Technique. I had, of course, heard of the work, but I never imagined at the time that it would completely change my approach to musical performance. As musicians, we are so often stuck in our world of habit that we forget about of the full potential of our minds and bodies.

Alexander Technique lessons thought me to question my habits. How can we change something if we are not aware of what our bodies do 'naturally'? These habits have a great effect on our creativity as musicians and the Alexander lessons showed me how to address them. It was Emmanuel Kant that stated that our 'understanding of the world will never be independent of the framework in which we place ourselves'. Today's society has a great impact on us, often forcing us to lose the full potential of our senses: the movement of our bodies, the panoramic ability of our eyes, and our sensitive sense of listening are all affected. This is what the Alexander Technique addresses. Being an organist, the optimal use of the body is essential. It was through these lessons that I learnt how to sit correctly at the organ. This may seem like a very basic principle but it is surprising of how much tension can be released once the body is balanced on the organ bench. This was something that my organ teachers had not addressed and it is alarming to witness many students, and indeed professional performers, sitting in unnatural positions. I now place a great importance on posture, and the ability to move freely at the organ. In an academic world that places a great importance on rigorous, original and significant research, the Alexander Technique can be seen as a research project that we conduct using ourselves as the focal point. Every project – our body – is different but what is essential is a willingness to understand the nature of our habits. It is through this work that we can enjoy performances free of rigidity and relishing in spontaneity. I thank Judith Kleinman for introducing me to this new world.

Tom Bayman

For me, the Alexander Technique has been taking that step back and exploring a deeper sense of who I am, so that freedom of expression is natural and easy, In practice or play this work never ceases to aid us in the search for truth and beauty. But it is a process that takes time, often seeming difficult or even non existent! - because our minds are absolute and habits set in, making no space for change. This has been and will continue to be a great challenge for me (among other things) but the important thing is that I am aware of these issues. Alexander work will always be with me and will be a technique for life.

Michaela Stapleton

Alexander has given me hope and shined a light on so many possibilities. That what we do doesn't have to be rigid and claustrophobic.

06. What is Going On in Schools?