Teaching Without Touching

by Catherine Kettrick, Ph.D.

Although Alexander began teaching without using his hands[i], using hands to teach the Alexander Technique has a long tradition. Indeed, hands and how teachers use them have become for many people the defining characteristic of teaching. We judge teachers both by the quality of their hands, and the "direction" they are able to convey with them.

But why do we use our hands? Alexander writes that with their hands the teacher "uses expert manipulation to give to the pupil the new sensory experiences required for the satisfactory use of the mechanisms concerned…."[ii]

However, a teacher uses more than hands. A teacher also gives the pupil "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…."[iii]

In Alexander's model of teaching, the teacher has the most responsibility: the teacher must "make the required adjustments… bring about the necessary co-ordinations… perform…for the pupil the particular movement or movements required…and… giv[e]…him the new reliable sensory appreciation." The pupil's sole responsibility is to "project the guiding orders as given to him," not attempting to carry them out but instead "*inhibit[ing] the desire to do so in the case of each and every order which is given to him"* (italics Alexander's).[iv]

In this model, over time, the pupil's projection of the guiding orders and the teacher's giving of the new sensory experience become linked, so that eventually when the pupil projects the orders without the teacher's hands, the new sensory experience automatically follows.

This model of teaching assumes that pupils will find it difficult, if not impossible, to make any changes on their own, especially without a teacher's guiding hands, and never at a first lesson. In fact, it assumes that it may take several lessons before pupils have enough skill to employ the Technique without a teacher. It also assumes that sensory experience can be given, and that the teacher's use must be excellent, otherwise a less than accurate sensory experience will be transmitted to the pupil.

There are consequences to using this model. In my observation, I find that when teachers make all the "adjustments," and "give" pupils new sensory experiences, the pupils by and large have no idea what is happening. They experience a new way of moving, they feel very different, but may have little or no idea of how they "got there." Thus, when they leave a lesson, and quite reasonably want to feel that way again, the only thing they know to do is to try and "find the feeling." Of course this doesn't work. They become confused, muddled and frustrated trying to "do" the Alexander Technique. They come

back to their next lesson asking you to "put their head in that place again," or complaining that they "can't find that place where their head should be."

I would like to propose a different model of teaching.

I came to this model in part from training with Marjorie Barstow, who placed great emphasis on us learning how to observe ourselves and others, and to do our own thinking; in part from watching her give the occasional lesson without using her hands, and in part from my own experiments, especially when faced with pupils who said quite clearly that they did not want to be touched. This model assumes that pupils can learn how to inhibit and direct at a first lesson, without a teacher touching them; that the pupil bears as much responsibility for the lesson as the teacher, if not more; that new sensory experiences happen because the pupil changes their thinking; and that the teacher's role is a guide: the pupil determines the territory they want to explore and the teacher makes sure the pupil doesn't get lost for too long in the woods.

This model also assumes that the goal for both teacher and pupil is to help the pupil become independent of the teacher as soon as possible, rather than depending on lessons to "put them right." If that is our goal as teachers, then from the outset our means must match that goal. In other words, we must teach in such a way that our pupils learn to think for themselves from the first lesson. To that end, the less I use my hands while teaching, the easier it is for pupils to know that they themselves are capable of observing, inhibiting and directing, and that any changes that happen are the result of their thinking, not my "manipulation."

I have found that the best way to demonstrate to pupils that they are capable of changing their thinking, and thus changing their coordination, is to introduce the Technique by teaching without touching. I do so by verbally guiding the pupil through a series of experiments where I ask them to observe themselves, to make changes in their thinking, to observe what results from that changed thinking, and to feed those results into another experiment. In essence I am teaching them to "analyse the conditions of use present; select (reason out) the best means whereby a more satisfactory use can be brought about and project *consciously* the means for putting the new use into effect."[v] (Italics Alexander's)

"Teaching Without Touching" at the Congress

I taught the above titled workshop four times during the Oxford Congress (2004), and once at the Lugano Congress (2008) and each time did part of an introductory lesson with a pupil who had never had a lesson, without touching them. Unfortunately, like sensory experiences, workshops are difficult to adequately describe on paper. That each beginning lesson will be at least slightly different, depending on the pupil and circumstances, only makes the task more challenging. So rather than describe the steps of one of the introductory lessons I gave, I will outline some concepts I use when teaching.

Teaching Concepts

1. People can only understand one new idea at a time. Each new idea needs to be introduced in a simple, logical manner, so that one clearly flows from another and builds on the previous ideas. If you had only half an hour to convey the principles of the Technique, what would you do? Which principles would you choose and in what order? What makes most sense to introduce first, second and third, and how can you simply and clearly introduce these principles? How can you connect these principles so the pupil can easily follow each step?

2. Concrete is better than abstract. When I first started using the metaphor of the spring, I asked pupils to imagine they had a spring between their thumb and forefinger, imagine squeezing it, and then asked them what happened. Eventually I bought some springs, and now pupils actually compress a real spring. Real springs work much better than imaginary ones. Use a model skeleton to show them where bones and joints are. Remove the pin that holds the scapula to the ribs on one side of your model skeleton, so when you talk about where the arm is attached, you can hold up the model's arm by its fingertips and prove to them that the first arm joint is the sterno-clavicular joint, not the glenno-humeral joint. Have them lay a hand on their collarbone, with their thumb touching the joint where the collarbone attaches to the sternum—the opposite hand to the collarbone you are touching (so left hand on right, or right on left). Ask them to move their arm, and report what they notice.

3. Make sure they have the anatomical information they need to effectively direct themselves. (See #2). Only when it is clear where the top of their spine/bottom of their head is does it make any sense to ask pupils to think about letting their neck be free so their head can go forward and up. As Mrs. Barlow says in her book *An Examined Life,* "When you're directing to a part of the body, you're sending little telegrams. That's why it's important to know where your…joints are—because you can send a message to the wrong address and nothing happens."[vi] Show pictures. Understanding the location and structure of the atlanto-occipital joint is crucial to their ability to direct clearly.

4. Ask questions and do experiments so they can discover both anatomical information and Alexander Technique principles on their own. Compressing a spring is a vivid, concrete way to make the point that the Alexander Technique does not teach you something to *do*, but to stop doing what you don't need to do. Having them move their arms around, notice how that feels, then drop their head back and down (while still moving their arms) and notice how that feels, is an excellent way for them to experience the power of primary control. If they can't feel a difference in themselves, they almost always can see it in you. If they can't see it, do it again more slowly. Direct their attention where to look. Use gestures.

5. Try to answer their questions with experiments they can do to find out the answer for themselves. If they say, "What about when I….." or "When I do ……it feels……" have them try it, ask what they notice and help them find out what they may want to change.

6. Assume what they report about their sensory experience is accurate. If a pupil directs their neck to be free and their head to go forward and up, and then moves forward in the chair and reports that the movement feels easier and you can see they are still pulling their head back and down, assume they are accurately reporting what they feel. That you know they can feel even easier doesn't mean they aren't easier than when they moved a previous time. And you can use a repetition of the experiment—especially if you have mirrors where you teach—to improve their observation skills.

7. When you do choose to use your hands, use them as a support of the pupil's continuing thinking. In other words, use your hands to blend with what the pupil is thinking, and help the pupil continue with that thinking a bit longer than they might on their own.

8. Make sure they know how they got to where they are. If your pupil reports feeling hugely different (which in my experience only happens if I use my hands) ask them to watch what they do, and while watching make themselves feel like they usually do. Help them see how thinking in the "old" way causes them to feel in the "old" way. Then help them stop that thinking and direct themselves in the new way. Repeat a few times until they can go from "old way" to "new way" easily.

9. Give them handouts that review what they learned and give them something more to think about and experiment with. Handouts are security. In fact, telling them at the beginning of a lesson that you will have handouts for them at the end, reassures them that they don't have to worry about remembering everything

10. Finally always remember:

- The less you do the more they learn.
- The slower you go the faster they learn.
- Always leave them wanting more.

A Brief Word About Group Classes

Being an actor, and also training with Marj Barstow, I am very comfortable teaching in groups. I have found that all of the principles of the Technique can easily be demonstrated in groups using this experimental teaching approach. I will often go through some beginning basic principles with the whole group (the springs, primary control, and some anatomical information) before beginning with one pupil to explore the principles more in depth. However, teaching "one" person in front of the group doesn't mean you aren't teaching the whole group. The whole group can do the same experiments you are doing with one person directly. You will find that when a second, third and fourth person comes to the front of the group, they will progress much faster

from having experimented on their own. Also, a huge bonus to working with a group is that you can use the other group members for feedback on what the pupil of the moment is doing. While the pupil you are working with may believe they are leaning forward, the group can assure them they are standing straight up. Your pupils will always believe their peers more readily than they will believe you.

Conclusion

When I teach without touching, and help pupils discover the principles of the Technique through doing their own observing, thinking and experimenting, they know what they have learned, and that they are capable of inhibiting and directing on their own. Then, when I do choose to use my hands, touch becomes a much more powerful and precise tool. Using touch becomes a guide, to help pupils continue with their thinking a bit longer than they might have confidence to do for themselves at that moment, or to point out something they are doing that they may not be aware of. In this way the simplicity of the Technique is clear. Pupils understand that it *is* a technique and they know that changes occur because of their use of the Technique, rather than because of the teacher's hands. As a result, they can more easily and quickly acquire the skill to confidently use the Technique on their own.

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[i] Maisel, Ed. (1969) *The Resurrection of the Body*. New York: Delta, p. xxvii.
[ii] Alexander, F.M. (1923, 1985) *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual*. Mouritz p. 99
[iii] ibid, p. 99
[iv] ibid, p. 99.
[v] Alexander, F.M. (1932, 1984). *The Use of the Self*. Orion. p, 39
[vi] Davies, Trevor Allen. (2002). *An Examined Life: Marjory Barlow and the Alexander Technique*. Mornum Time Press, p. 61.