

Illusion or reality?

Are we Teaching what FM Alexander was Teaching?

Peter Nobes

First Chapter

I love the Alexander work, and I love what it has done for my life. It's changed how I walk and improved my posture and balance. But it has also taught me, in the words of FM Alexander himself, "*a means whereby life can be lived sanely*"¹ and given me, as Dewey said "*a changed emotional condition and a different outlook on life*"². So I was very excited when I saw this question on a TV quiz show:

'The Alexander Technique is a method for improving what?'

I had my fingers crossed that the answer would be 'control of human reaction'³, because that's what FM said his work was primarily about. Or 'behaviour.'⁴ Or maybe 'quickenning the conscious mind'. Sadly, the answer was 'posture'.

Around the time I watched this quiz show, I was introduced to an influential psychologist in the UK prison system. While we were chatting about what we do for a living, I said to him that I had something that could benefit his clients. I could teach them something – *an exercise in finding out what thinking is; the most mental thing ever discovered* – that would help them:

- acquire conscious control of their mental and physical powers

¹ CCCI xi

² CCCI xxii

³ UCL 93

⁴ MSI viii. '*... the primary control which makes it possible for man consciously to change and improve his behaviour...*'

- stop and make a new choice before carrying out an activity
- develop control of their reactions
- quicken their conscious minds
- be free from ‘emotional gusts’
- find within their minds the ability to resist, conquer, and then finally govern the circumstances of their lives.⁵

He sounded interested and said he would go home and read about it online. When he got back to me, he was very sceptical. How was improving their posture and releasing their muscle tension going to help his clients? And what’s this thing about free necks? How will that stop them from reoffending?

Most people in the non-Alexander world haven’t heard of the Alexander Technique. As that quiz question demonstrates, the majority who have heard of it think we’re teaching improved posture. Others have whacky ideas about what we do. I told a friend of a friend, a journalist at the Guardian newspaper, that I teach the Alexander Technique and he said: ‘The Alexander Technique? Isn’t that like divining? Like, with two sticks?’

But ‘posture’ is so engrained in people’s minds that every journalist I speak to manages to put the word into their articles, even though I ask them not to.

I was talking to the health editor of a well-known publication, and told her, very nicely, that I had been misquoted in her magazine. ‘The writer and I agreed the copy and then a sub-editor changed it and added the word ‘posture’, I said. ‘It’s really not about posture. Why don’t you come and try it, so you can find out what it really is?’

Her friend asked ‘What is this Alexandra Technique?’ and the editor replied: ‘It’s about posture.’

Our books and websites don’t help. They list the advantages of learning the Technique – things like posture (obviously), poise, balance, release of muscle tension, fascial stretch, and moving more comfortably. The Alexander Technique is a really good means-whereby for all of these physical benefits, but it’s also an excellent means-whereby for all those things that would help the offenders learn to govern the circumstances of their lives, and not reoffend. Why don’t we put that in our publicity?

Alexander’s books

Where can the psychologist find out more about what FM was teaching? In Alexander’s books. But he’s not likely to read them, because, although they are simple, they are not easy. Even Alexander people don’t find them easy. In a discussion about FM’s writing on an online forum, the consensus was that the books are dreadful and that FM was a bad communicator. Someone said that they thought readers can find whatever they want in the books, and another described FM’s writing as ‘God-awful’⁶.

⁵ I hope I don’t need to point out that these are all quotes from FM or Dewey.

⁶ Maybe that is about them, not about the books.

‘Another source of misunderstanding has arisen through my choice of words for which I have often been criticized. While

And yet Dewey said they are written in ‘the simplest English’, and referred to Mr Alexander’s ‘clear and full exposition’.

Many years ago, one of my teachers said that: ‘FM’s books are like fine wine – they get better with time.’ Of course, they don’t actually get better; the books don’t change – we do. For me, the books have become clearer over time because I have increasingly had the experiences FM is writing about. Listen to what Dewey actually said:

The principle and procedure set forth by Mr. Alexander are crucially needed at present. Strangely, this is the very reason why they are hard to understand and accept. For although there is nothing esoteric in his teaching, and although his exposition is made in the simplest English, free from technical words, it is difficult for anyone to grasp its full force without having actual demonstration of the principle in operation. And even then, as I know from personal experience, its full meaning dawns upon one only slowly and with new meanings continually opening up. Since I can add nothing to the clear and full exposition that Mr. Alexander has himself given...⁷

Is it possible, I dare to ask, that anyone who finds FM’s writing difficult, or dreadful, or ‘God-awful’ –despite, as Dewey said, his use of the simplest English – has not had actual demonstration of the principle in operation?

Is it possible, gentle reader, that if you are teaching improved posture, or release of muscle tension, or balance, or natural movement, or fascial stretch, or even ‘poise’, that you can’t find what you’re teaching in his books, because you are not teaching what is in his books? And, in fact, that you are not teaching what he was teaching?

I understand why a first-year trainee might find FM’s books difficult, because they’ve had little experience of ‘the principle in operation’. Indeed, I sometimes wonder if it’s worth trainees reading them at all. But by the time someone has been teaching for ten years or so they should have had the experiences FM is writing about, and should have had time for the full meaning to start dawning upon them and, in Dewey’s words, for ‘new meanings to continually open up’.

Are ‘good posture’ and ‘more natural movement’ crucially needed? Is ‘release of muscle tension’ hard to understand and accept? Is it difficult to grasp the full force of ‘poise’, or does the full meaning of ‘balance’ dawn upon one slowly, with new meanings continually opening up? Dewey was talking about something much, much deeper.

He wrote ‘*The principle and procedure set forth by Mr. Alexander are crucially needed at present*’⁸ in 1946, just after the greatest catastrophe in human history. How did he think the Alexander work would help?

Writing this seventy-odd years later, the world is in crisis, and, as I’m going to show you, the Alexander work would help. We are short-changing the world by offering people the physical benefits, and not the ones that FM and Dewey felt could put an end to wars.

I do not hold a brief for myself in this regard, I have persistently avoided using words which are labels for ideas and “systems” which I am convinced are fundamentally unsound, and I am able to state that when reasons for such criticism have been given to me I have always found in my critics a tendency to read into words meanings which fitted in with a particular construction that they were accustomed to put upon them, and I suggest that the habit and the misunderstanding are closely connected.’ UCL *Introductory* p xxxiii

⁷ CCCCI xxi

⁸ CCCCI xi

Imagine a world where all prisoners were taught how to stop and make a new choice before perpetrating a crime, or where all politicians were learning an exercise in discovering what thinking is. Or, if all children were taught to have conscious control of their mental and physical powers, and to develop control of their reactions.⁹ We would have fewer prisoners, very different politicians and happier, more confident children.

Mental not physical

There's a lot of talk about body habits on our websites and in the popular books on the Technique, but little about mental ones; lots about how to change how you move, but little about how to change how you think. And yet FM didn't say that his work is an exercise in finding out what movement is.

Stereotyping is an example of a mental habit.

An Israeli man once told me what 'all Arabs' are like. That's very strange, I thought, because that's my stereotype of what Israelis are like.¹⁰

Stereotyping is inevitable because the brain is designed to perceive patterns. The problem is when we believe the stereotypes. I sometimes catch myself stereotyping, and then I either feel ashamed or smile to myself – that old habit again! Through the Alexander work I've learned to pause and make a new choice.

Alexander teachers say a lot about pausing and making a new choice when it comes to physical habits – tightening the neck, and so on – but little about pausing and making a new choice about mental habits.

Imagine a world where everyone learnt to 'diagnose their own peculiar mental habits'¹¹; to stop and make a new choice about their thinking; to smile when they catch themselves stereotyping or being judgemental; and to ask themselves where these prejudices come from. That's what'll put an end to wars, not learning how sit and stand correctly, or how to move in a more comfortable way, or to stretch fascia.

In the online discussion of FM's books, someone said they think we can find 'whatever we want' in them. Can we? I can't find anything about fascial stretch. I can't find much about posture or release of muscle tension. I've had a go at counting all the instances of 'posture' and 'postural' in the four books, and I can find about 105 mentions: 24 in *Man's Supreme Inheritance* (MSI), 14 in *Conscious Constructive Control of the Individual* (CCCI), and, interestingly, none at all in *Use of the Self* (UoS). It appears about 75 times in *The Universal Constant in Living* (UCL), but FM used it 'off his own bat' fewer than 20 times.

⁹ They'd also get better poise and learn to move without muscular strain, but that would be a tiny benefit in comparison.

¹⁰ I was mistaken. They are not! The Israeli man was mistaken too.

¹¹ MSI p66

This all adds up to about just 60 instances of FM writing the word ‘posture’ in all four books.¹² In contrast, he uses the word ‘conscious’, and all its variations like unconscious, consciously etc around nine hundred times.

So, FM wrote about consciousness rather than bodies, and Alexander teachers are teaching about bodies and not about consciousness. Dewey thought the work was crucially needed at a time of crisis, but we’re offering the world poise, release of muscle tension and fascial stretch – worthwhile though they might be, they are not life-changing.

Something has gone wrong. What can we do to help the psychologist? And the world?

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¹² Maybe you prefer the word ‘poise’ for what we teach. FM uses that 15 times – even fewer than ‘posture’ - all in MSI. The word appears seven times in UCL, but, again, they are in the bits not written by FM.