

Group teaching: preparing the receptive field

Meade Andrews

Experiential learning within a group setting has been part of my life study since the age of eight, when I began my training as a ballet dancer. As I progressed further in my performance training, studying the art of modern dance, and later acting, I was again engaged in group activity in the classroom, rehearsal hall, and onstage in front of an audience. I have continued to focus on learning through the group process during my training as a teacher of the Alexander Technique, and in my subsequent career as Alexander teacher, acting coach and movement consultant for theatrical productions.

I have taken numerous private lessons in my thirty years of Alexander study with a variety of outstanding teachers. At the same time, I have experienced deeply satisfying times of learning in a group setting, primarily with Marjorie Barstow, master teacher and graduate of Alexander's first training course (1934). I spent hundreds of hours working with Marj and observing her teaching methods in groups ranging from 20 to 80 students. I recognized her talent for aiming straight at the heart of a lesson with student after student, and witnessed her astounding ability to engender a deeply rooted experience with the Alexander Technique in each student. During the years of my intensive study with Marjorie Barstow and my teacher-training course with Bruce and Martha Fertman, I remained curious about the phenomenon of exponential learning in a group setting. I ultimately incorporated all that I learned from my teachers with my own experiences as an artist and teacher, and made a commitment to group teaching as one of my primary educational constructs.

Presenting introductory workshops, classes for performers (actors, dancers, musicians, singers), and sessions for teacher-trainees has inspired me to create structures to facilitate learning in a group, both for the individual and for the group as a whole. Over the course of my 18-year career as an Alexander Technique teacher, I have observed that the learning curve in a group class is heightened by the involvement of the whole group in the experiential process. And that creating shared movement experiences among the members of the group has a direct affect on their ability to remain alert, focused, and present throughout a group session.

As a teaching tool, I have developed thematic movement explorations for the beginning of each class, designed to awaken, sharpen and sustain the students' attention span over the duration of the session. In order to develop the curiosity and interest of the observer, and to maintain their interest while I work with an individual student in front of the group, I have created movement 'études' to heighten the group learning experience. These selected explorations focus attention and awareness by creating the 'receptive field', a condition of kinaesthetic and cognitive alertness that can enhance the student's receptivity to the specific components of the Alexander Technique – observation and awareness, inhibition, and direction. As a result, the individual student is more available for a lively, responsive interaction with the hands-on work of the teacher. In addition, the group as a whole is ready to participate more fully as observers because their

coordination has been enlivened and curiosity enhanced. They can focus more fully on the individual receiving a lesson because they ‘see’ more clearly with educated eyes, and ‘sense’ more specifically from the viewpoint of a developed kinaesthetic empathy. Because of the information provided within the specific structure of each étude, the group as a whole develops a more articulate and detailed approach to observation over the course of time. Through these shared learning experiences, students and teacher are united within the gestalt of the receptive field, enhancing the learning possibilities inherent within the subtleties of the Alexander Technique.

During the workshop that I presented at the Congress, I introduced three movement études for the participants to explore:

1. identifying and exploring three-dimensional movement and the three-dimensional spatial kinesphere
2. awakening the skeletal structure and expanding the range of joint articulation in movement
3. identifying and engaging the three weight centres of the body: the head, thorax and pelvis.

The core material of these études stems from the work of Rudolf Laban and Irmgard Bartenieff. Carol Boggs, Alexander Technique teacher and certified movement analyst, introduced me to this study and has continuously inspired my teaching.

The Congress participants were a delightful mix of teachers, ranging from the recently graduated to seasoned practitioners. As I guided them through each of the three études, I also explained the purpose of each exploration as a tool for awakening psychophysical awareness in relation to the Alexander Technique.

1. The first étude I presented focused on exploring the relationship between the three-dimensional design of our body moving within the surrounding three-dimensional space. Often, students will begin their first lesson in the Alexander Technique with the intention of ‘improving their posture’. They view posture as ‘static’, the rigid holding of one part of the body in relation to another part, as they strive to ‘stand up straight’. As I guide students through this étude in a group class, they begin to experience movements that involve a constantly adjusting, ever changing pattern of the parts in relation to the whole. Then I guide them through an understanding of ‘reaching with intention’ through combinations of movement in the vertical, horizontal, and sagittal planes. When I offer hands-on guidance to the individual student after this experience, they are less posture-oriented, and more movement-oriented in their three-dimensional body/space awareness. Many times they have totally forgotten their need for ‘good posture’.

2. The second étude, clarifying and expanding the range of joint articulation in the skeletal system, is also designed for recognizing and relinquishing postural holding patterns. In this instance, the focus is on identifying habitual patterns which create over-efforting in the muscular system, which inevitably compresses the joints. I guided the participants through a tour of each joint, explaining the type of joint and encouraging them to explore the movement possibilities within the unique range of articulation

inherent in each joint structure. Again, this etude stresses the responsive, adjustable and connected nature of our inherent coordination.

3. The third etude I introduced focuses on the balanced coordination of the three weight centers of our body: the head, thorax, and pelvis. Weight is centred through each of these three areas, which are linked together via the flexibility of the spine. Each weight centre is capable of articulation within a three-dimensional range of movement, and I began by exploring the articulations possible in the vertical, horizontal, and sagittal planes. The participant is offered a range of movement choices at each centre, and an understanding of the connections and adjustments possible between one weight centre and another. This etude reminds us that posture is dynamic, changeable, and guided by the primary control.

The études which I introduced at the Congress focused primarily on observation, awareness, and attention. Other études which I present during the course of a group class center on the other major aspects of the Alexander Technique: inhibition and direction. All of these études, usually presented at the beginning of the group class, are designed to promote a heightened state of psychophysical awareness, which I define as the receptive field. These explorations can create a unified group consciousness, replete with detailed information gained in an experiential, movement-based structure. The études are focused on a ‘means-whereby’ framework, and can reduce the ‘endgaining’ response that often occurs at the beginning of a new learning experience. The group begins to work together immediately, alleviating the ‘fight or flight’ pattern and awakening the primary control. An enlivened sense of self within the group via these études, coupled with a communal learning experience, can further enhance individual responsiveness to the subtle, deep and specific aspects of the process we call the Alexander Technique.

Working in Washington DC for twenty-five years, Meade Andrews directed the dance program at American University and taught at the Studio Theatre Acting Conservatory. She has presented numerous workshops for performing artists in the US, Japan, Australia, Spain, and Canada. She recently completed a course in the Alexander Technique and the art of breathing with Jessica Wolf in New York at ACAT. She currently teaches in the graduate acting program at Florida Atlantic University, and maintains a private practice in Boca Raton.

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