

THE ART OF GROUP TEACHING

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Experiential learning within a group setting has consistently been a major component of my artistic training, performance work, training as an Alexander teacher, and teaching style. As a dancer and actor, I was constantly engaged in group activity in the classroom, rehearsal hall, and on-stage performance. For the past 22 years, as an Alexander Technique teacher, I have often been invited to bring Alexander's process to groups of performers at universities, conservatories, and professional theatres. I discovered that my experience of learning in groups and my performance background provided a rich foundation for movement explorations in relation to the Alexander work.

To facilitate optimal learning in a group setting, I have developed a wide range of thematic movement etudes. I usually present these explorations within the first 15 minutes of the class. These etudes revolve around aspects of Alexander's process: observation and awareness, inhibition, direction, and primary control. They are designed as a means of bringing unity to the group in regard to a specific Alexander principle, and as a lead-in to my main focus: working with the individual student in front of the group.

During my 35 years of Alexander study, I have enjoyed numerous private lessons with a variety of outstanding teachers. Simultaneously, I have had deeply satisfying experiences of learning in a group environment, primarily with Marjorie Barstow (1899-1996), master teacher and graduate of Alexander's first training course in 1934. Barstow consistently inspired a deeply rooted experience of the Alexander Technique for her students, primarily within a group setting. She had a unique talent for aiming straight to the heart of a lesson with student after student, as she worked with them in front of groups ranging from 20 to 80 participants. Her work was very specific in relation to both simple activities (such as walking) and the complexities of artistic performance. Barstow's teaching methods and my own movement background strongly influenced my creation of the thematic etudes which I designed to suit the needs of each group, and to enhance each group's learning potential.

F.M. Alexander defined his core directions (my neck to be free, etc.), as a blueprint for awakening a deeper realm of psychophysical coordination, known as the primary control. In her introduction to the Centerline Press edition (1984) of *The Use of the Self*, Barstow describes this process from her own perspective:

The most remarkable aspect of F.M.'s experiments proved that the only true guidance needed was his sequence of directional thinking which must carry through no matter what movement is to be accomplished. Professor John Dewey termed this aspect "thinking in activity." Alexander 1984 [1932]. No page numbers listed.

In addition, she notes the discipline with which Alexander approached his work:

Both F.M. and A.R. stressed the sequence of directional thinking in their teaching. At times they seemed almost too persistent on this point, but really they were not. This *new* way of thinking and this *new* approach to learning was so unfamiliar it required constant reinforcement. The Technique needs to be personally experienced to be fully understood. (Ibid.)

These two paragraphs piqued my curiosity, both as a dancer and as an Alexander teacher. Knowing that Marjorie Barstow had also been a dancer and dance teachers, I decided to develop a series of movement etudes for students of the Alexander Technique in relation to her phrase, ‘the sequence of directional thinking’, as the focus of my Continuous Learning Class for the 2008 Lugano Congress.

I chose to create an individual movement etude for each word of Marj’s phrase, and then ultimately unite them in one, continuous exploration. I began with the word ‘sequence’ which, as a group we decided implied these possibilities: the connecting linkage within a structure containing a beginning, middle, and end; two or more thoughts or movements joined together in a specific manner; or, following a process in which ‘one thing naturally and easily leads to another.’

To begin our work, I asked the participants to walk around and through the space. Then I added turning, and changing directional pathways, followed by a pause, followed by walking in circular or zigzagging floor patterns. After they explored each of these elements, I suggested that they allow themselves to explore arranging each of these elements in differing sequential orders.

We then discussed their responses to the exploration. Most agreed that at first the sequence felt imposed rather than organic, and that they felt compelled to consciously choose first one element, and then add another, etc. After a time, they experienced the sequence ‘doing itself’ as they began to allow each part of the sequence to lead naturally to the next. Rearranging the sequence became easier and one moment did indeed lead to another. Participants then began to experience the sequence as a whole construct, recalling Alexander’s key phrase for uniting his core directions: ‘all together, one after the other’. (Ibid., p. 29)

Continuing in the vein of ‘allowing’ natural, sequential pathways of movement to emerge, we then explored the concept of coordinated balance within the gravitational field. Starting with an awareness of the ground under our feet, I guided the group on a more internally directed, yet sequential and ever-upward ‘journey’ of poise. We experienced the poise of our coordination system in relation to the ankle joint and foot, the knee joint, the hip joint, and finally the poise of our heads on our spines via the atlanto-occipital joint. As we built these relationships to gravity and balance from the ground up, based on the thought that we are always in an ever-changing, continuously adjusting relationship to gravity, an integrated sense of the inter-connected relationships of ‘play’ among these

joints emerged. This allowed the participants to take ‘another think’ about the ways in which postural holding patterns can interfere with our natural and inherent sense of wholeness in thought and movement.

The second etude focused on Barstow’s third word choice: directional. I began by asking each person to find a space for exploration in the room. Then, I guided the group through an exploration of the various dimensions and plane of movement (vertical, horizontal, sagittal), ultimately combining them in diagonal and spiraling patterns. Participants explored these directional pathways in space, initiating the movement from various sources (crown of the head, fingertips, heels, sit bones, etc.), each one leading the whole body into a further exploration of three-dimensional movement through space. Eventually, they experienced many of the directional pathways inherent within their nervous systems, which engaged their coordination as a whole, and allowed them to discover movements beyond their habitual patterns of use. In this exploration, the interface between the body’s propensity for three-dimensional movement, in relation to the surrounding three-dimensional space, created a lively movement dialogue. We discussed the exciting possibilities of moving beyond patterned, habitual responses, with the sequence of directional thinking as a stimulus for allowing these new pathways to emerge and flourish.

The final etude focused on the last word in Barstow’s phrase: thinking. In actuality, we had been sending messages from our brains to our bodies throughout these explorations: making choices, creating and following intentions, directing movement initiations from various aspects of our bodies, choosing pathways through space, and following sequences of movement events with heightened awareness. I believe that Alexander intended for his core directions to create a similar kind of enlivened connection between thought and movement in all of our activities.

I concluded our two-day class with an exploration of Barstow’s complete phrase ‘the sequence of directional thinking.’ The etude I introduced focused on the ‘thinking/learning’ modes that students might bring to their first, individual hands-on work with an Alexander teacher. The participants divided into pairs, taking the roles of both student and teacher. The teacher simply moved the student’s arm through space while I instructed the ‘student’ to think in the following manner:

1. Passivity (‘I want the teacher to take full responsibility for moving me.’)
2. Resistance (‘I am afraid and I don’t trust the teacher or the process.’)
3. Anticipation (‘I will try hard to guess what the teacher wants me to accomplish, and respond immediately.’)
4. Listening and responding (‘I will listen for the teacher’s guidance, and allow myself to respond openly to her suggestions.’)

The first three models of thought encouraged the discovery of a common understanding and vocabulary for the participants, as they recognized and discussed these habitual thought patterns and their physical manifestations. The fourth mode, which is based on the sequence of directional thinking, provided the basis for the next level of understanding and learning: an open dialogue between teacher and student based on

verbal instruction and kinesthetic awakening through touch, which allows the subtle, deep, and specific aspects of Alexander's process (observation, inhibition, direction) to emerge.

Each of the etudes described above is a thought/movement experiment based on Alexander's educational constructs. These etudes can assist students to recognize unwanted habits of thought and unconscious postural holding patterns, can create a unified group consciousness that enhances learning possibilities, and also reduce anxiety and the 'end-gaining response that often occurs in the early stages of a new learning experience. Marjorie Barstow's elegant phrase, 'the sequence of directional thinking' is an exquisite container for Alexander's powerful yet streamlined directions: 'I wish my neck to be free, to allow my head to move forward and up, so that my back can lengthen and widen.' In exploring her phrase through movement etudes, I return to Alexander's original directions with a deepened understanding and awareness of the beauty of the coordination between thought and movement.

In the most basic and yet miraculous way, thought creates movement and movement affects thought. Using constructive thinking as a means of generating energetic and interrelated, directional pathways of coordinated movement, Alexander developed a unique approach to living. He gave us a means to step back, awaken, enliven, and integrate all aspects of our organic design. We are embodiments of psychophysical unity, which Alexander defined not as the use of the mind or the use of the body, but as the *use of the self*.

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