

An Étude a Day

Étude: a short musical composition typically for one instrument, designed as an exercise to improve the technique or demonstrate the skill of the player.

"My experience may one day be recognized as a signpost directing the explorer to a country hitherto 'undiscovered' and one which offers unlimited opportunity for fruitful research to the patient and observant pioneer." FM Alexander¹

Working in groups may have been an optional teaching method in the past but Alexander teachers are increasingly called upon to manage large groups, if initially only for introductory purposes.

One option is to give every person a number and have them wait for their one-on-one lesson, but people, businesses and societies today are in a hurry. If they have just heard about Alexander technique on Oprah or their team leader has announced that every employee is going to benefit from Alexander technique over the course of the next 3 months, they don't want to be kept waiting.

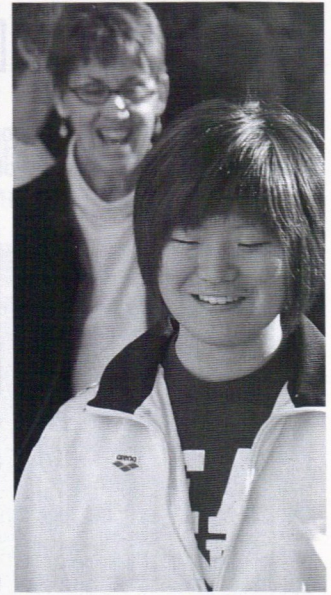
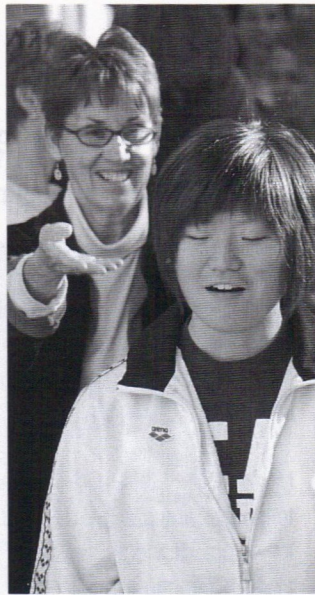
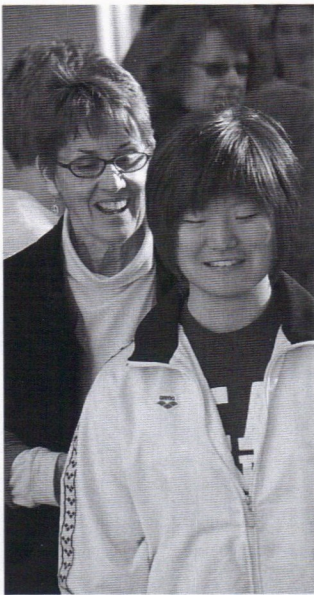
As the word gets out and the phone starts ringing off the hook, do you have a way to help as many people as possible in as short a time as possible? In other words, are you prepared for the tsunami that is coming?

Meade Andrews is a 23 year teaching veteran of the Alexander technique and has created and refined many workshop activities for actors, dancers, musicians, singers and teacher trainees. She also runs continuing professional development courses for teachers of the Alexander technique.

She has observed that the learning curve in a group class is heightened by the involvement of the whole group in the experiential process. By creating shared movement experiences among the members of the group Andrews believes it has an effect on their ability to



Meade Andrews finds a moment to praise at 2008 Malibu residential USA



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Up, up and away... Malibu USA.

remain alert, focused, and present throughout a group session, especially as she works with an individual in front of other participants.

At the beginning of each class a "thematic movement exploration" is conducted with the intention of awakening the primary control and she calls this process "preparing the receptive field". Andrews defines the receptive field as,

"a condition of kinaesthetic and cognitive alertness that can enhance the student's primary control and receptivity to the specific components of the Alexander technique: observation and awareness, inhibition, and direction."

Andrews observes the following enhancements in learning:

'individuals are more available for a lively, responsive interaction with the hands-on work with a teacher in front of the group... observers who have developed 'kinaesthetic empathy' via the étude are able to focus more fully on the individual receiving the attention because they can "see and sense" more specifically... throughout the workshop, a more articulate and detailed approach to observation develops for all.'

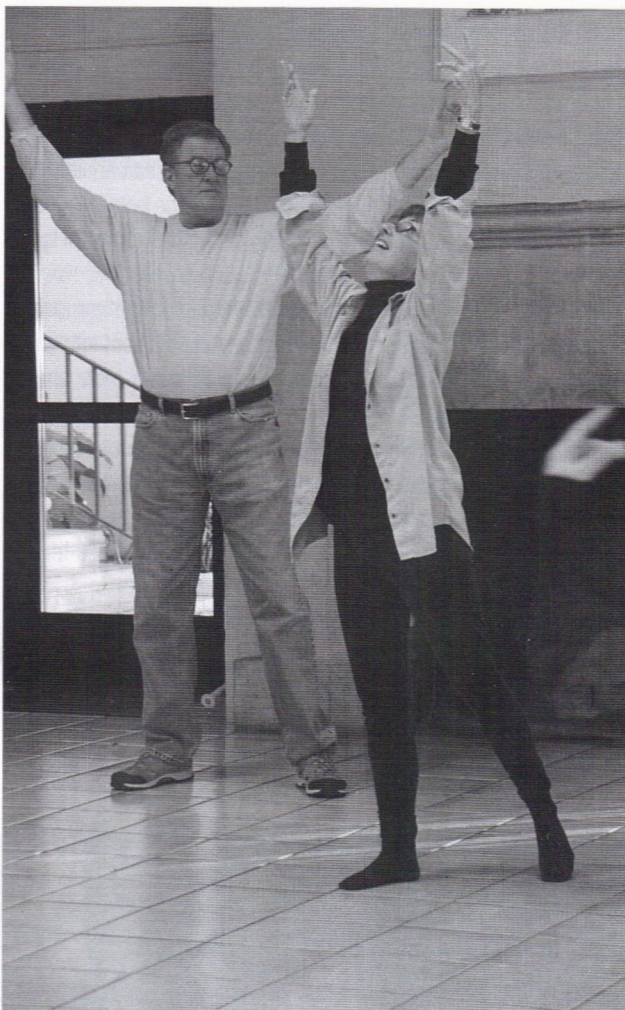
As a whole, the students and teacher are increasingly "united within the gestalt of the receptive field, enhancing the learning possibilities inherent within the subtleties of the Alexander technique." Judith Stern, a past director of and currently on the teaching faculty of the American Centre for the Alexander Technique (ACAT) in New York observes, "The workshop itself is 'the experience' - I found it quite remarkable to both observe and participate in."

Alexander teachers are best "qualified" to comment on the effect an étude has on a group teaching environment. Stern goes on, "Meade has a unique ability to teach group process and helps Alexander teachers develop the skills she has so clearly defined."

Judith Grodowitz, an Alexander teacher with 22 years of teaching experience with actors and performers, describes Andrews' work "... a supportive ensemble spirit is created almost immediately, thus participants felt free to explore. As the work progressed towards demonstrations with individuals, comprehension and learning was magnified by the movement experiences the group had shared together earlier."

In this article we will look at some of the introductory activities that you might use if suddenly placed in the spotlight with 20-70 audience members. Ideally you will have organised a group of colleagues to help with the event, but with or without their assistance, you will want to bring every single person in the room at least to first base.

Rather than explaining to them "what" the Alexander technique is, we are giving them an opportunity to experience their reality differently first and then weaving the explanations around their observations of themselves. You could launch straight into FM's story, you could begin explaining physiology and anatomy you could even get someone up the front and dive straight in. However, there is another, gentler and more personal way to touch audience members where they are, in this very moment. Welcome to the Études of Group Work.



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Meade bringing the group alive, Malibu USA

The process asks the participant to create a postural set in their body. After each set has been created internally, the participant is firstly instructed to take a walk around the room and then secondly, asked to shake hands with someone else in the room.

Instruct the group to do the following:

1. Recreate FM's pattern when performing. E.g. he would tighten his neck, pull his head back and down, raise his chest, pull in his lower back, lock his knees etc.

Next: Take a walk / shake hands / Feedback

2. Create a collapse or slump in your body.

Next: Take a walk / shake hands / Feedback

3. Create imaginary juggling balls and pretend to juggle them. (variations on this can be to imagine the colour and size of the balls, then change to juggling clubs, then fire torches!)

Next: Take a walk / shake hands / Feedback

After each step, get feedback from participants on their observations. You'll notice that as the activities become more energetic, so too do the interactions within the group change and become much more spontaneous than with the earlier personas.

Andrews observes, "To juggle within a collapse is impossible, even imaginary juggling! In order to manage the imaginary balls you must become free, you must engage the inner child and let go." Whilst participants are having fun, you have them in the palm of your hand.

At this point, when the experience of freeing has become personal and of course validated by other people in the room, the explanation of Alexander's discoveries is easier and also makes sense on a kinaesthetic level. It's the experience before the explanation that seems to be the key to success in groups and also to differentiating Alexander's work from all other "things" that participants might have tried before.

One major pitfall of explaining the "head, neck, back" theory of Alexander's prior to the experience of integration in the individual, is that people automatically associate these concepts with not only their preconceived ideas about posture, but a particular quality of posture that implies you must keep your back straight and stiff, or that it's bad to bend.

The Three Bodies Étude (concepts of postural habit and primary coordination)

This comes first in the group process for several reasons:

1. People are coaxed out of their chairs and onto their feet, moving through the room.
2. It serves as an ice-breaker, and allows people to interact with each other.
3. It focuses on observation, awareness, and recognition of habit, the first step in the AT process.

The étude breaks down barriers for participants because they are actually being allowed to take on a character that isn't necessarily them and creates a group synergy that becomes more than the sum of its parts.

The 4 Circles of Attention Étude (focusing attention clearly in the room)

This étude works to gather the attention of each person in a cumulative fashion in much the same way a perfect wave gathers its momentum and size over a large distance before it can begin to peel along a point break. It brings what is known as the "group dynamic" into action and unites everyone in a common awareness or energy for the next step. If you have ever wondered how to get an audience on side, this could well be the missing link in your process.

The following paragraphs can be used as a script when you are in front of the class. Read it aloud now to get a feel for how it works.

1st Circle - You: think about what you notice within yourself, take stock of every single sense you are aware of and bring it all into your attention now. Increase your sensitivity in your hearing, eyes, skin and the motion of your breath. Note: Keep this simple, it's just a beginning point.

2nd Circle - Colleague: extend your attention to the people sitting/standing either side of you. Limit your awareness to those within your immediate vicinity and become aware of their pres-

ence, their energy perhaps, the sound of their breathing, their scent, their visual shape and form.

3rd Circle - Teacher: extend your attention now to the teacher or leader of the group. Take in all the information you can about them in a non-judgemental way. Experience the distance between yourself and the teacher as closing, as if you are getting closer to them.

4th Circle - Everyone: now consider every person in the room, yourself, your colleagues and the teacher. Accept them into your awareness, plus also all other elements of the room—the chairs, tables, floor, roof, windows etc.

Be sure to ask for everyone's feedback on this étude in order to gauge how far participants have progressed within the group dynamic.

The Thinking Étude (how thoughts affect physiology)

In this étude you may have a very large group of people. You want to introduce them to some basic concepts but also have the luxury of being able to break into smaller groups later for individual attention.



Going experiential with the group, Malibu USA

Lyn Charlsen, director of the Alexander Training Institute of Los Angeles says, "I can observe the step by step progression that leads the participants through a sequence with a theme throughout: inhibition, sensory perception, attention to particular moments and individuals."

Step 1.

You will be asking participants to use the following thoughts to focus on whilst sitting, standing or walking.

"I must do it fast and have to get it over with quickly"

Ask for feedback on breathing and awareness of sensation in the body.

"I'm at ease with myself and I have all the time I need"

Ask for feedback on breathing and awareness of sensation in the body.

Step 2.

Now, direct their attention a little more specifically this time by asking them to "notice where in relation to their body they felt heavy, light, easeful or blocked, pressure or heaviness."

Finally, ask them to "notice in relation to their movements: where do I feel heavy, light, easeful or blocked, pressure or heaviness."

This is the very beginning point for people to look inwards and find out what they actually already know about themselves. It's not a right and wrong lesson on human movement which is what most people are expecting from a teacher. It is a safe and relevant exploration of their inner awareness which sets them up to ask more questions and want to continue the adventure within the small groups which come next.

At this point it could be timely to recount Alexander's story to help explain what is going on here. His story will have a totally different relevance to someone who has just been guided through a simulation on their own terms and could well introduce a brand new understanding of the work for someone who has only had one-on-one lessons in the past.

The Physiology of Inhibition Étude

One of the hardest terms to explain in a neutral way is inhibition. It needs so much defining that there is little a teacher can communicate verbally without the benefit of a personal interaction, backed up with hands-on guidance. The physiology of inhibition can be experienced using the following simple étude.

The teacher firstly asks all participants to lie on the floor with the strict instruction to do "nothing".

Step two is to begin giving instructions for action, for example, "go for a walk", "raise an arm", "sit in a chair".

Get feedback from participants after this process. What you will find is that people have very powerful experiences of wanting to do what they are told, of wanting to do the right thing. The mere act of not moving when they are requested to do something creates all sorts of tension, tightness, feelings of frustration and interference with their breath. And the wonderful thing is, the participants are telling the teacher what their reaction to inhibition is doing within their body.

But what if we explained inhibition first? Would it mean that all these feelings were triggered whenever we asked someone to inhibit a certain habit or response? "We might have lost the chance to explain it properly if we allow the student to develop their understanding without exploring the meaning first."

The next step is to take their feedback and weave it into the new version of the activity. Instead of refusing to react to the instructions, allow participants to choose what they are going to do. But

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before they move, ask them to insert a pause between receiving the instruction and carrying it out thus bringing in the concept of inhibition.

"The importance of allowing people to explore their own experience before we get into subtle explanations cannot be overlooked." In Andrew's experience, "people tend to get stiff if we get subtle too soon."

It's little wonder. Every person has their own life-learned and embodied understanding of what sitting or drinking or looking at the horizon entails. When we use words to describe what we mean, we cannot assume that the student will actually hear what we are saying. In most cases it's safe to assume that they are instantly creating their own understanding of our explanation before they even experience what we actually mean.

When teachers stand in front of large audiences of people and explain the AT, without first giving people the opportunity to explore and discover their own personal experience of the concepts,

"participants lose the opportunity to approach this work from a brand new perspective, one that isn't influenced by their miscon-

ceptions of themselves or other disciplines they may have previously explored."

It may also help avoid the common question, "is this like...?"

The Experience of Inhibition Étude

Form the group into a circle and follow this 3-step process.

Step 1: the first participant says "yes" to herself (out loud) without doing anything else as a means to apply what she has already learnt about inhibition;

Step 2: she makes eye contact with someone across the circle (2nd person) and says "yes" (out loud) to them;

Step 3: as the 2nd person begins the 3-step process, the first person moves across the circle and takes the place of person 2, who will be moving to the place of person 3 by then.

This kicks off a domino effect where many people are moving across the circle at the same time.



Together we learn, Malibu USA

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A further variation on this étude is to get participants to remove the “yes” and simply make eye contact first, nod their head very lightly and then proceed according to the aforementioned steps.

Text doesn't do this étude justice*, but in action, it provides a plethora of interesting circumstances for people to observe themselves in activity, as well as others in the room.

Caught Red Handed Étude (exploring kinaesthetic awareness [relationship, size, movement] in the actual moment of activity)

Take a look around the room whilst you're explaining something of deeper meaning, perhaps anatomy or kinaesthesia. (Perhaps ask people to take notes on this topic as “there will be a test later”)

What you will notice is obvious. People compress themselves into all sorts of positions on their chairs with pen and notepad in order to get everything you say down on paper.

Pick out a particularly good example and whilst you're still talking, make your way over to the person you would like to catch red-handed in their habit.

Ask them to pause. What do they notice about themselves? Have them describe in their own words what they notice about the relationship of their head to the rest of their body. Then ask permission to offer some guidance with your hands.

By using the activity the person is performing in the moment, you help everyone in the room understand the concept of in-the-moment awareness. Then of course, your hands give the person the experience of freeing their neck and allowing their head to lead them out of their predicament, not their usual habit of stiffening back into an upright position. The rest of the group can begin to see the change occur in-the-moment as the person moves from habitual posture to dynamic poise and balance.

It takes many years to perfect the art of effective group teaching. Using études for workshop presentations are a good starting point that Alexander teachers can learn to use in a variety of environments. They can be adapted to specific audiences and not only offer every individual the opportunity to experience a new sense of self, they can also empower the teacher to present to larger and larger groups.

The future for the Alexander technique is looking brighter and brighter. Developing the skills to work with larger groups may be viewed as optional today, however, if the mainstream press decides to run with the Alexander story on a more consistent basis, these skills might well become a necessity.

Group teaching is an artform that Andrews has developed to such a refined level that she now conducts post-graduate training for Alexander technique teachers around the world.

Endnotes

1 F.M. Alexander *The Universal Constant in Living* p xlii E.P. Dutton: 1941

About the Contributors

Meade Andrews has taught and performed as an actor, dancer, choreographer, director, and movement coach for dance and theatre throughout her career. Her Alexander technique training was at the Alexander Alliance (1983-86) and she has worked throughout the US, Canada, Europe, and Japan. She currently maintains a private practice in Boca Raton and teaches in the graduate acting program at Florida Atlantic University, directed the dance program at American University and continues to present workshops at the Studio Theatre, her professional base for 20 years. Mentors that Andrews attributes her learning to are: Marjorie Barstow, Frank Ottiwell, Bruce and Martha Fertman, Carol Boggs, Michael Frederick, Jessica Wolf, Judy Stern, Elisabeth Walker and John Nicholls.

Judith Stern has been a physical therapist for 34 years and an Alexander technique teacher for 17 years. Judy specializes in chronic or acute pain conditions, combining her knowledge of physical therapy and anatomy with her knowledge and skill as an Alexander technique teacher. A senior member of the ACAT faculty, Judy also maintains a private practice in Rye, New York.

Judith Grodowitz was on the faculty of the New School Drama School graduate program (formerly named the Actors Studio Drama School) from 2000-2007. She received her Alexander training at ACAT, NYC certifying in 1987, and has continued post-graduate studies with many leaders in the international Alexander community. In 2003, she completed a year-long advanced training certification in The Art of Breathing, led by Jessica Wolf and based upon the work of breathing innovator Carl Stough. Certified member, AmSAT.

Lyn Charlsen is director for the Alexander technique Institute, Los Angeles. She has been an Alexander technique teacher for the University of Southern California School of Theatre, USC Music School/Opera Division, and also for California State University. An Alexander technique teacher for 27 years, Lyn trains A.T. teachers and practices in Van Nuys and San Monica, CA.

Please visit www.directionjournal.com/etude for free audio, photos and other resources supporting this article, including a live interview with Meade Andrews recorded July 6th, 2009.

* Visit www.directionjournal.com/etude for a verbal description of this process by Meade Andrews