

In multiple voices: Alexander Technique in the high school choral rehearsal
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This paper shares insights from a six-week research project in a Vancouver secondary school choir that explored how the process of applying Alexander Technique (AT) principles and procedures in choral rehearsal may benefit adolescent vocal skills. Through the voices of the choral teacher (Karen Parent Dionne), the Alexander teacher (Gabriella Minnes Brandes), and the students, we highlight our experiences from the study.

Literature on the connection of Alexander Technique to singing is growing, while literature exploring its application in choral work is only beginning to emerge. A singer's instrument is the body, and vocal pedagogies are increasingly addressing the importance of the whole system's coordinated use in singing through inclusive kinesthetic or bodymind approaches such as Alexander Technique (Brandes & Davis, 2007; Bunch, 2004; Heirich, 2005; Hudson, 2002; Weiss, 2005). Phillips (2000) describes music education as whole-brain learning that involves a student's cognitive, psycho-motor, affective, and kinesthetic domains. He notes that singers' "kinesthetic feeling for tone production has much to do with successful singing" (p. 222). Jordan (1996, 2005) advocates the use of Alexander Technique for choral conductors and its related Body Mapping approach to physical awareness in the choral classroom. Jordan asserts that "the development of the kinesthetic and aural senses are the most important to learn and recall vocal technique and the lack of incorporating these is a shortcoming in choral pedagogy" (2005, p.12). Voice education is moving into a new era of bodymind awareness where today's voice teachers and choral directors must "take responsibility for developing their own kinesthetic awareness in order to guide their students effectively" (Nelson & Blades-Zeller, 2002, p.12).

Before we began

Karen: I found that students' vocal habits and tensions were deeply entrenched and difficult to release even with consistent vocal technique instruction in rehearsals during my five years of choral teaching. I had also been personally experiencing habitual tensions that inhibited my freedom of tone and breath. Through private AT lessons and private voice work, I began to sense a more released way of singing. I was excited and nervous to explore this approach with my choral students because I had limited experience with AT and was a beginning researcher.

Gaby: I have been teaching the Alexander Technique for over 20 years and have done extensive work with adult musicians. I was excited to be involved in this project, looking forward to collaboration with Karen, and wondering what changes we could expect students to have with such explorations in AT. My goal was that with the Alexander Technique experience the choir would acquire a new language to consider their experience of singing.

The choir: Fifty-eight singers participated in the study with parental consent. Students ranged in age from fifteen to eighteen, with the majority in their first year of senior concert choir. Eight volunteers wrote weekly journals, and four of these participated in semi-structured interviews at beginning, mid, and end points of the study. Observational notes on rehearsals and on videotaped classes at the beginning and end of the study were also part of data collection.

Week One: Restoring awareness

Gaby: I spoke briefly about my teaching background and then made connections between posture and singing. Many students immediately straightened and tightened their backs, as I drew their

attention to the new tightness in them. I asked students to walk around and think of a song in their heads. They were attentive. I talked about using ourselves efficiently. The goal of the first week was to have students experience and explore what happens within themselves while singing. With my directions they checked the distribution of their weight on the floor. Then I instructed them to move their heads and notice what happens to their voice. We also explored finding full support from the floor while singing and moving around the room.

Karen: After the AT session, I conducted vocal warm-ups at a quick pace for management efficiency and wondered how this constrained student self-attention by not allowing much time for response. I introduced new repertoire and observed lagging attention evidenced in sagging heads and side slumped postures as heads were down into the music. I realized I did not revisit the AT concepts or “up” awareness at all as we dug into repertoire work. I didn’t stop to reflect. There was a drive to accomplish tasks within rehearsal time and to maintain student attention.

Students: “Are we learning something new that will change us or are we learning something that we had?” This question led to a discussion of the way in which children use themselves well intuitively and how we lose this poise and may regain it with conscious control and awareness. Allan¹ thought the AT lessons were “a waste of time,” then decided that the technique involved a “delicate balance.” He noticed that at the end of breath he pushed “really hard to try to last longer” and, “I cram my head back, like they displayed on the video.” As students reflected on walking and singing they said: “breathing and walking changed to match the tempo in the song,” “I feel tension in my neck,” “the back of the neck changes,” “there’s tension in the knees,” and, “I feel some release.”

Week Two: “The rock blocking that whole breath”

Gaby: I was amazed and pleased at the level of interest and curiosity the students manifested. We started with “hands-on” experience as the students stood in a semi-circle while Karen led their vocal warm-up. Students were attentive to directions and tried to follow the warm-up activities as well as my hands. Our follow-up discussion was around what it was like to sing, have hands-on and what was required to be able to split our attention.

Karen: During rehearsal my attention never rested long on any one as I attended to the order of tasks. I observed that students’ attention to body use during rehearsal became intermittent or disappeared altogether as concentration went to repertoire. I wondered if there was a short attention span for the process of developing an awareness of use. I wondered about students’ effort of “trying” to achieve a better use and the effect of concentration on awareness.

Students: “Dr. Gaby put her hands around my back and lifted my hipbone area. I felt that more air was coming out of my mouth. It felt as if the rock blocking that whole breath of air has been lifted, and the gush of air simply released itself. It felt really great. I had more breath and the sound came out brighter and louder while we were doing the warm-up.” “If I bend my knees I sing better. I realize that I move on my feet, I change the places of my support, and I feel some holding.” “I felt that using the technique that Dr. Brandes taught me, my voice could project more as opposed to the rigid posture I usually have.”

Week Three: “So little effort”

Gaby: Students seemed to be more aware of their gait. I reviewed the basic principles of the Technique and then worked with three students in front of the rest of the choir, identifying the initial habits, and finding an alternative that called for new awareness and a different relationship of the head-neck-back. The volunteering students reported they moved with more ease and less effort in their legs. The choir observed the shift from tension and tightness to the ease with which the volunteers moved under my directions and hands-on.

¹ Names of students in this paper are pseudonyms.

Karen: I noticed volunteer students and a few participants were attentive to their use. Others stood on the insides and outsides of their feet, some with toes pointing inward, some with arms crossed on the belly, and some were in a side-swayed stance. The solo of a baritone volunteer was becoming more resonant each time I heard him. He thoughtfully applied his understanding of balanced, released stance and head-neck-back direction. Recalling awareness throughout the rehearsal seemed pertinent to consistent good use.

Students: “Today was filled with awesome new sensations that I have yet to be able to duplicate. I think the biggest thing I learned was that I can-not trust my own body: when I thought I was slouching I was actually sitting up straight. I learned that I don’t need to be stiff like a board in order to have a good posture. Also, it feels different when I actually feel how one body part affects another. I can particularly remember relaxing my jaw and my lower back relaxed as well.”

Week Four: “Much more power and energy”

Gaby: Karen led the choir through the warm up from the piano while I gave verbal directions to notice the particular ways which they stood as they sang. Students reported that when following these directions their breathing was easier and the sound had more resonance. Then three volunteers worked with me to demonstrate further work with the Technique. The third student was tight in many ways so I decided to work with her singing while walking to have further release. I asked her to sing the beginning of the song in her head and only then start singing out loud. I had my hands on her as she sang. She said she heard her voice open up and the choir concurred.

Karen: This week, student application of the principles was observable in the choir’s stance and audible in their energized tone. The choir reported that releasing unnecessary tension, increased breath, and greater resonance of tone were felt most consistently during the warm-up and during the singing of memorized or familiar repertoire where the interference of music folders was not an issue.

Students: “I’m amazed at not only how much difference a little thinking can make but also at the fact that you have to make time to think. Otherwise it won’t work.”

Week Five: Accumulating attention

Gaby: Similar to previous weeks we combined work with volunteers and the whole choir. Throughout the demonstration with volunteers I talked about the relationship between the head-neck-back while reminding the choir to observe others sing. As Karen led the warm-up, I did hands-on work with random singers. It was clear that students were thinking about the ways in which they were standing, breathing, and singing. Their sound filled the room. Students said they felt the resonance. We had a brief discussion of the benefits of learning the Alexander Technique and taking care of their whole “instrument” as they became more aware of choices in their use.

Karen: During the vocal warm-up I gave directives as Gaby had in week four, such as “think up, free the neck, lengthen the back, soften the knees” and “release the jaw.” The warm-up finished with a canon and I noticed the sound of the choir pleasurably ringing with resonance. I saw that volunteers as well as a few other keen singers applied the directions most consistently throughout a rehearsal. The sound of the choir had more colour and freer tone, and students readily expressed the language of directed use.

Students: “I heard the sound grow richer,” wrote Lisa. Allan offered, “I could hear a different tone not only in my voice, but in the voice of the whole choir. It was a really interesting sensation to be part of a whole group who sang better.” David, a tenor respondent, keenly observed Kathryn’s habits of breathing during her demonstration. These two students had been in the choral program for three to four years and had studiously applied the abdominal-diaphragmatic-costal breath management that was

taught. David wrote, “We both think more on the belly, and more about breathing, rather than posture, center of gravity, etc. She looked like she was using a lot of effort to sneak in some of those breaths.”

Week Six: “Everything is interconnected”

Gaby: We had presentations from two singers who had extensive experience with AT. Carole Davis, a singer and AT teacher shared her explorations of using AT in her singing. Sandra Head, a professional singer and singing teacher with years of AT lessons, spoke about the Technique in terms of working on process and not on product and being aware of our bodies. She led students through various warm-up activities as I went around the room and put my hands on some students. After our session the choir worked on a piece they were less familiar with. Now they had to consider how to hold their music folders. In previous sessions there was clear “spill over” from our introductory work to the rest of the rehearsal. This time the atmosphere and attention were quite different. I wondered if it was lack of familiarity with the music. When students learn a new piece or work on the technical elements of their music they quickly forgot what we had been doing in the AT warm-up. This was the first time that I saw a disjointed sense between the warm-up and the rest of the practice. Karen’s comments were specific to the music and less about “use” of the singers.

Karen: Applying AT to singing was not just going after a goal, our guest Sandra Head explained, but about attending to how you get there. As the choir repeated a simple passage, Ms. Head noted that some students inhaled too much. I noticed her deliberate choice to avoid language that focused on successful completion of the task when leading an exercise. Her approach was an invitation to explore, and not to “get it right,” as she asked singers to simply “notice.” “Inhale gently,” she suggested as they moved through the exercises. For the remainder of the rehearsal I reviewed notes and rhythms with the choir in preparation for an upcoming concert. Heads looked down into the music and the tone was generally not energized. The benefits of the technique seemed related to the sustenance of awareness even during concentration.

Students: Allan reflected that, “since we began the Alexander Technique I have become really aware of my neck and body and how everything is interconnected.” David recalled that in the beginning he focused mostly on the “breathing area (i.e. abdominals).” His attention to preparation for singing changed “so that I don’t have to use as much effort.” “The six weeks have basically been for me the development of awareness to my whole body, and to adjust to where I am relaxed, most “up,” and where I am not straining any of the body parts, especially the neck.” Julia commented, “Before, I was just about notes and getting it done and everything, but now I really know how I use my body when I'm singing.” “I am more conscious – not critical – of my body when I sing,” Lisa reflected.

Our shared lessons

In this study, through collaboration with a certified AT instructor, we experienced the potential of the application of Alexander Technique principles for choirs and voice educators. When the work is done in a large group there ought to be time allocated for observation and discussion of what is observed. When each student has hands-on experience with AT, the whole group of singers experience some of the principles and potential of the Alexander Technique. Students started to explore how attention to the ways in which they used their bodies impacted their singing. The students who participated fully with journal writing, interviews, hands-on, observation and participation expressed the most significant change in their thinking. Also, students who just observed and had very minimal hands-on reported a growing understanding of the connection between singing and the ways in which they used their bodies. Overall, this six-week research project with a secondary school choir showed how applying the Alexander Technique (AT) benefited adolescent vocal skills.

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