

## **Applying Alexander Technique principles with a high school choir: Lessons learned**

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This paper is based on a six-week research project that took place in a secondary school choir rehearsal setting. In the paper I describe the research process, drawing specific attention to the Alexander Technique activities and considerations; the ways in which the Technique was introduced to a high school choir; and the comments made by the choir instructor, the choir participants and me (for another discussion of this project see Brandes & Dionne, 2008). I conclude the paper with some lessons learned from this collaborative project, reflecting on F. M. Alexander's discussions of the role of Alexander teachers.

### **Why did we set out to do this research?**

The impetus for the study came from Karen Parent Dionne, the choir instructor. The background is discussed in Karen's MA thesis, where she describes her interest in young people singing, and provides an in-depth discussion of the current literature on choral singing and current vocal pedagogies (Parent, 2007). In the introduction to the thesis, she writes:

A singer's instrument is her body, and vocal pedagogies are increasingly addressing the importance of the whole system's coordinated use in singing through inclusive kinesthetic or body-mind approaches such as Alexander Technique (Bunch, 2004; Heirich, 2005; Hudson, 2002; Weiss, 2005), Body Mapping (Conable, 1998, 2000; Jordan, 2005; Buchanan, 2005), Feldenkrais (Nelson & Blades-Zeller, 2002), Yoga (Carman, 2004), and T'ai Chi (Rao, 2005). Healthy vocal skill development in adolescent choral voices through increased

body-mind awareness is my interest, specifically how Alexander Technique lessons may facilitate this. (p. 1)

Early in the project, Karen elaborated on what brought her to seek this collaboration with me, an Alexander teacher: ‘I found that students’ vocal habits and tensions were entrenched and difficult to release with vocal instruction. I had also been experiencing habitual tensions that inhibited my freedom of tone and breath.’ Karen took some private Alexander lessons with me and reported that she ‘felt a more released way of singing.’ At the time that Karen took lessons, we explored the concerns that she had with the choir, and I was intrigued to see whether a short-term project could lead to some positive changes in the choir. Having worked with many musicians in the past, I was excited at the possibility of collaborating with a choir conductor and working with high school students. As we, Karen, the students in the choir, and I, embarked on this project, the key question for Karen, the choir instructor was: What are students’ perceptions of the effects of Alexander Technique on the development of choral skills? Specifically, what are students’ experiences of posture, breathing and tone production as they learn to apply Alexander Technique principles? The key question for me, the Alexander teacher was: What are the possibilities for collaboration between a choral instructor and an Alexander Technique teacher?

### **Who are we?**

Let me take a moment to describe the participants in this project. Karen Parent Dionne teaches in a secondary school in British Columbia, Canada. She is also an active musician who sings with Elektra, a renowned choir in Vancouver. I have been teaching the Alexander Technique privately for twenty years. I have given many workshops to adult choirs and have taught courses about voice and the Alexander Technique in post-secondary settings. I am the co-director of the

Vancouver School of the Alexander Technique, a CANSTAT certified teacher-training program. I also hold a Ph.D. in education and have conducted various research projects in collaboration with teachers in secondary schools.

The choir included 58 students in grades 10 through 12, ranging in age from 15 to 18 years old. They had been working together as a choir for at least six months before the project began and many of them had been in the choir for a year prior. The students knew one another well and felt comfortable with one another and with Karen, the choir instructor. None of the students had heard much about the Alexander Technique before we started our project. A few had taken some private voice lessons.

### **What were the sources for the data in this research project?**

The research received approval from the University of British Columbia Research Ethics Board, as well as the Vancouver school board. All the choir members (and their parents/guardians) provided written consent prior to the onset of the study. The consent included participation in warm-up activities, hands-on work and debriefing discussions. Eight participants agreed to keep bi-weekly journals and four also agreed to be interviewed throughout the research. The research project spanned six weeks, during which I joined the choir rehearsals twice a week. During my visits, the conductor and I led the choir in various warm-up activities using Alexander Technique and other voice activities. Data sources were field notes that Karen and I took after every session, bi-weekly email exchanges where we discussed the progress of the project, our reflections on what took place and our plans for the coming sessions, transcripts of in-depth interviews conducted by Karen, analyses of the journals students kept with bi-weekly entries written in response to specific questions, and videos of the first and last sessions of the choir rehearsals (for further details of methodology see Parent, 2007 pp. 23-33).

## **What happened in the six weeks of the study?**

In this section of the paper, I describe the activities that I led, Karen's thoughts and students' comments. The weekly plans were based on previous work I had done with singers, as well as my discussions with Karen and responses to students' questions.

### Week One: Introduction and observation

I began by showing the Australian video 'The Head Leads and the Body Follows' as a way into a discussion about the Alexander Technique and some of its basic principles. Then I used various slides to highlight the connections between the Technique and singing. Prompted by this visual information, many students straightened and tightened their backs and I drew their attention to their reaction. Then I asked students to move around the room and think of a song that they liked and knew well. I wanted the students to experience, explore, and discuss what happened to them when they sang aloud, especially in comparison to their sensations when they sang mentally, 'in their heads'. Students were very attentive. As they were walking and only thinking of a song (but not singing aloud), I asked them to pay attention to what was happening within them. One student noticed a change in his breathing. One student reported feeling a buzzing in his head. Another noted a change in her knees.

Then we shifted the focus to self-observation while singing. Following my directions, students paid attention to the distribution of their weight on the floor. I instructed them to move their heads in various directions in space and notice if there are any changes to their voice. We also explored finding full support from the floor while singing and moving around the room. We talked about poise and the difference between young children and adults regarding awareness and conscious control. During our discussion, I asked students what they attended to

and what caught their attention while they were singing. In my notes from the first week, I wrote, ‘I wonder what changes we could expect students to have within such a short intervention? If students are aware of the “space” between stimulus to sing and their response as they sing, they will have some new choices and that will be quite significant.’ As I anticipated the weeks to come, I thought that the most significant change would be Karen’s, because she had private lessons and had done a fair bit of reading and thinking about the Technique before we began collecting data for the study. Karen’s field notes from the first week suggested that when she moved from the warm-up to the rehearsal, she did not think about or mention any of the principles of the Technique. As she introduced new repertoire to the students, she observed ‘lagging attention evidenced in sagging heads and side slumped postures as students’ heads were down into the music’. Her focus was on maintaining students’ attention on the singing. In the debriefing discussion for that week, students were encouraged to ask questions. The key question one student asked: ‘Are we learning something new that will change us or are we learning something that we had known before?’

### Week Two: Hands-on during warm-up activities and debriefing

I was pleased and somewhat surprised at the level of interest and curiosity the students exhibited when they saw me arrive to class for their rehearsal. This week, Karen led the vocal warm up as I walked around the room and put my hands on students. I wanted to have as many students as possible experience singing with my hands on them. They were attentive to my hands and tried to follow the warm-up activities as well as their perceived instructions of my hands. Our follow-up discussion focused on what it was like to sing and have someone’s hands on them. Students wanted to know about my intentions when I had my hands on different parts of their bodies. They asked what was required to be able to split the attention between singing and the hands-on. We also talked about

singing, balance and movement. I asked Karen to speak about her experience in taking private Alexander lessons. She spoke about her interest in the Technique. Karen found that, through the lessons, she was acquiring new observation tools that increased her awareness and ability to implement the Technique while singing. Karen's field notes suggested that during the rehearsal she observed that students' attention to their body use became intermittent, or that it disappeared altogether as concentration went to the repertoire. She wondered about students' effort of 'trying' to achieve a better use, and the effect of concentration on their awareness. Students' journals provided some insight into their experiences. One student wrote, 'Gaby put her hands around my back and [that] lifted my hipbone area. I felt that more air was coming out of my mouth. It felt really great. I had more breath and the sound came out brighter and louder while we were doing the warm-up.' In our class discussion one of the students said, 'If I bend my knees I sing better.' Yet another student wrote 'I felt that using the [Alexander] Technique my voice could project more as opposed to the rigid posture I usually have.' Another comment focused on the hands-on component: 'The touch was very light but I still felt it all over. I felt that I elongated [and then] the thinking up makes breathing easier and fuller'. Because I spent so little time with each individual student, I was surprised that many choir members reported that they felt a difference when they sang.

### Week Three: Demonstrations using hands-on with volunteers

As students walked in, they seemed to be more aware of their gait. I wondered if it was because seeing me served as a reminder of the Technique, the discussions and the experiences we had. I reviewed the basic principles of the Technique and then worked with three students in front of the rest of the choir, identifying initial habits and finding alternatives that called for new awareness and a different relationship of the head-neck-back. I guided the volunteers in

sitting, standing, walking and monkey position. The volunteer students reported that they moved with more ease and with much less effort in their legs. One of the volunteers reflected on his experience in his journal: ‘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 couldn’t 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. I actually feel how one body part affects another’.

The choir was called upon to actively observe the demonstration and provide feedback to the volunteering students. The choir served as a ‘living, reflecting mirror’. They observed the shift from tension and tightness to the ease that came as the volunteer students moved with my directions and my hands-on guidance. After a short debriefing session where I asked the volunteers for feedback and asked the rest of the choir what they observed, Karen took over and started the rehearsal. In her field notes, she reported that she noticed that the students who volunteered and a few other participants were attentive to their use throughout the rehearsal, but others were not. She observed that ‘many students stood on the insides and outsides of their feet, with toes pointing inward, some with arms crossed on the belly, and some were in a side-swayed stance’. She also commented that ‘the solo of a baritone volunteer was becoming more resonant each time [she] heard him. He thoughtfully applied his understanding of a balanced, released stance and head-neck-back direction’. She ended her field notes for Week Three stating, ‘Recalling awareness throughout the rehearsal seemed pertinent to consistent good use’. At this point in the research, all of the students had had some experience with the Technique, but there were striking differences between the choir and the volunteers who had more hands-on time. The volunteers were more perceptive, noticing more details of the changes in themselves when they were in movement. Students who were just observing had a different perspective. One of the observers suggested that the Alexander

Technique is about a particular posture: ‘This week I haven’t got to experience of Alexander Technique first-hand, therefore I am still somewhat confused about the actual body posture suggested by the Technique’. Another student who did not have hands-on work this week wrote, ‘I still do not understand what you are supposed to be doing when you sit up or stand. It is very perplexing whether you are doing this right or wrong’.

#### Week Four: Demonstrations, observations and discussions

Karen led the choir through the warm-up activities as she was sitting at the piano. At the same time I gave the choir verbal directions to draw students’ attention to the particular ways that they were standing as they sang. Some of the verbal instructions I used were, ‘free the neck, notice your balance, release the jaw, think up along the spine, allow the arms to dangle, smile behind the eyes’. Students reported that when they followed these directions, their breathing was easier and the sound had more resonance. Then we had three volunteers work with me to demonstrate further connections between the Technique and singing. I asked the first volunteer to sing so that I could observe her while she was singing. When she sang, she was holding her shoulders up and one arm was more held than the other. I asked her to start singing again and this time I put my hands on her and directed her attention to her use. Her voice changed and she noted that there was more ease in her singing. The second volunteer sang very quietly. I decided to have him sing in a monkey position with his back toward the rest of the choir, and that helped him release his breath and shift the resonance of his voice. I asked the third volunteer to work with me while she was singing and walking. She and the choir observed that her head went forward and then back and down with each step she took. She shortened her neck as she tried to breathe more deeply. I then asked her to sing the beginning of the song in her head and only later did I ask her to sing out loud. I had my hands on her as she sang. She

said that she heard her voice open up: ‘That felt really good! My back was opening up.’ The choir, who were observing us, concurred.

Karen noticed that students’ application of the principles was observable in the choir’s stance and audible in their energized tone. The choir reported that they were releasing unnecessary tension, had increased breath efficiency, and experienced greater resonance of tone most consistently in the warm-up and during the singing of memorized or familiar repertoire, where the interference of music folders was not an issue. One of the students said, ‘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

As in previous weeks, we combined work with volunteers and the whole choir. Throughout the demonstration with the volunteers, I talked about the relationship between the head-neck-back and reminded the choir of the potential for learning from observing others sing. As Karen led the warm-up and I did hands-on work with singers at random, it was clear that students were thinking about the ways in which they were standing, breathing, and singing. Their sound filled the room. The students said they felt the resonance. Then 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 while singing. Students reported that it was easier to pay attention to their bodies as they were singing because of Karen’s and my specific instructions. Students also enjoyed observing the volunteers and being able to perceive various habits as well as shifts that occurred with hands-on. One of the observers said, ‘It seems that when you put your hands on the back, the sound is brighter, clear and open. The sound is not muffled.’

The warm-up finished with a canon, and Karen commented that the sound of the choir was pleurably ringing with resonance. She noticed that those who served as volunteers (as well as a few other keen singers) applied the directions more consistently throughout a rehearsal. The sound of the choir had more colour, there was freer tone, and students started to use some of the new language of direction and use. 'I heard the sound grow richer,' wrote one of the students. Another said, '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.' One of the volunteers wrote, 'We used to think more on the belly, and more about breathing, rather than posture, center of gravity, etc. She [one of the volunteers] looked like she was using a lot of effort to sneak in some of those breaths [before she had hands-on].'

### Week Six: Culminating experience

This week, we had presentations from two singers who had extensive experience with the Alexander Technique. Carole Davis, a singer and an Alexander Technique teacher shared her explorations of using the Technique in her singing. She sang in front of the choir and shared her reflections on applying Alexander principles to singing. Sandra Head, a professional singer and singing teacher who has had years of Alexander Technique lessons, and who wrote her MA thesis about the Alexander Technique and teaching singing (Head, 1996), spoke about the Technique in terms of working on process and not on product, and being aware of our bodies, specifically when singing. She led students through various warm-up activities as I went around the room and put my hands on students. After the warm-up session, the choir worked on a relatively unfamiliar piece. This was the first time since we started the project that the students held folders with notes in their hands. As opposed to previous sessions, which the points (?) discussed in the introductory work and warm-up were

focused on during rehearsal, the attention of the students was now directed elsewhere. In all the previous weeks, Karen referred to the warm-up activities throughout the whole rehearsal. This week Karen mentioned Alexander Technique principles less and students' attention was directed elsewhere. I wondered if this lack of focus on the Technique had to do with the students' lack of familiarity with the music and therefore they had to hold the folders in their hands and place much more of their attention to the music and the words. Perhaps that took away from the choir's ability to be attentive to their use as they were singing. When students were learning a new piece or working on the technical elements of their music, they quickly forgot what we had been doing in the Alexander warm-up. This was the first time that I saw a disconnection between the warm-up and the rest of the practice. Karen's comments throughout the rehearsal addressed concerns about the music rather than the 'use' of the singers. She reviewed notes and rhythms with the choir in preparation for an upcoming concert. Karen wrote in her field notes, 'Students' heads were looking down into the music, and the tone was generally not energized'.

Although the final rehearsal had less of a focus on the Alexander Technique, the students readily reflected on their experiences in the project. In our final debriefing of the project one of the students said, 'Since we began the Alexander Technique I have become really aware of my neck and body and how everything is interconnected.' Another student 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.' Yet another student commented, 'The six weeks have basically been for me the development of awareness to my whole body'. Another student reflected, 'I am more conscious – not critical – of my body when I sing'.

**What lessons did we learn?**

We saw that students, a choir conductor and an Alexander teacher, can work together in significant ways. Even when the work is done in a large group, as long as there is time for observation and discussion of what is observed, and given that each participant has some hands-on experience, the group as a whole learns some of the principles and potential of the Alexander Technique for singers. The students who participated most fully (with the journal, interviews, hands-on, observation and participation) expressed the most significant change. However, even students who only observed and had minimal hands-on experience reported a growing understanding of the connection between singing and the ways in which they used themselves. Students started to explore how attention to the ways in which they stood and breathed influenced their singing. The choir conductor became more aware of her instructions to the choir, and of the potential in including specific instructions that connect singers' use and function in terms of singing.

As we consider similar collaborative endeavours that call on Alexander teachers to work with group of students (and their teachers), I suggest that we must attend to the following terms of engagement: a commitment to a long-term process, built-in time and structures for observations, structured times for discussions of what is observed and experienced, organized time and structure for experience with as much hands-on as possible, and varied venues (interview, journal writing, video) for reflection and discussion of the experience of learning to apply principles of the Technique in different contexts.

Music teachers often see students' misuse but comment on it in terms of performance and end-results, sometimes lacking the language to discuss students' challenges in other ways (Brandes & Davis, 2007, p. 33). This research project highlighted the possibilities and potential for the development of a more broadly encompassing language. Working in collaboration, the choir instructor and the Alexander teacher enhanced each other's understanding of performance, while

developing ways of observation, articulation and possibilities for change in habitual patterns of use.

Learning can be a nuanced and meaningful process. Over time, learners develop a shared language to capture their experience and learning. In this research project, the newly acquired shared language provided unique links between the experiences of the students, the choir conductor and the Alexander teacher. It created bridges between theories of singing, the Alexander Technique and making music. Students had new tools to observe and describe their internal and external processes, as well as their processes of singing with a growing awareness of the Technique. In a collaborative learning process, Alexander Technique principles were continuously applied and assessed in various new ways.

Alexander regarded education as an indirect procedure that involved recognizing and inhibiting the ‘familiar messages responsible for habitual familiar activity’ and changing them for ‘unfamiliar messages responsible for new and unfamiliar activity’ (1941, 1969, p. 11). In the same vein, there is great potential for Alexander teachers working in educational settings, where they may have opportunities to explore the familiar and the unfamiliar in learning. In his book, *Man’s Supreme Inheritance*, Alexander discussed the role of Alexander teachers who have the tools to teach students awareness of their habits and methods of inhibiting these habits, so that students will be able to ‘gain slowly but correctly the necessary experiences in the correct use of those muscular mechanisms which will enable [them] sooner or later to govern [these mechanisms] properly without the aid of the teacher and to employ them with accuracy and precision’ (1918, 1946, p. 135). Alexander provides teachers with a systematic set of steps for their teaching. They should first observe and analyze, then bring about the necessary changes and then ‘point out the first guiding order or orders to be brought into play by the pupil—namely, the inhibiting of the tension of the muscles’ (p. 139).

At that point, students learn to use constructive conscious control and inhibition.

Alexander summarized the relationship between the teacher and student thus: ‘The brain of both pupil and teacher are at work the whole time. No use is made of “hypnotism” or of auto-suggestion, but the confident, skilful, patient, and explicit directions of the teacher should tend to remove flurry and vagueness and consequent waste of mental and physical effort’ (pp. 138-9). Alexander highlighted the reciprocal nature of teaching and therefore the need for teachers to work on themselves as they use hands-on when they teach. Teaching involves ‘giving the pupil correct experiences in sensory appreciation, in the spheres of re-education, readjustment, and co-ordination. Furthermore, in order to give these satisfactory sensory experiences, the teacher must himself be in possession of a reliable sensory mechanism and have gained the experience in re-education and co-ordination that required for a satisfactory readjustment of the organism’ (1923, 1951, p. 76).

This six-week project illustrated the potential for collaboration between Alexander teachers, performing artists and students. It highlighted the reciprocal nature of such collaboration and the potential for learning on the parts of all participants. Alexander called on teachers to be systematic in their teaching. One way to hone our skills as teachers is to seek opportunities for collaboration with teachers in other fields. Alexander teachers could include a systematic collection of data, analysis and reflection as a part of the collaborative work.

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