

Confident Creativity

Corinne Cassini

AT Perspective

The Alexander Technique as developed by F.M. Alexander is a means to support our recognition and awaken our appreciation of the value of changing patterns of behavior. What I am calling patterns of behavior are the habitual ways in which we go about our daily activities. Our desire for a more rewarding and fulfilling life is largely impeded by these patterns. AT brings about the conditions for new and different choices to become available. We are more often than not unaware of how these patterns of behavior affect our functioning. Our thoughts and emotions determine the ways in which our bodies coordinate themselves and move through life in response to our desires. AT is a means to efficiently engage the “how,” or the process of fulfilling our desires, that best matches our inherent design. AT gives us an embodied experience—physical, mental, emotional, and potentially spiritual—of the differences between an unexamined habitual reaction and a response or action chosen out of awareness. The awareness gained in reaching a new experience gives us a choice relative to the new experience. We are therefore able to create a new experience for ourselves and retain the freedom to choose or not choose this new experience.

There were several key moments in F.M. Alexander's own learning process—which started with the desire to heal his recurring hoarseness while he acted on stage—and in his teaching. These turning points later became what we AT teachers often call “principles” or other words we create to describe our individual interpretation and application. Alexander realized that it wasn't sufficient simply to make a decision to change his habits; he first needed to know these habits more intimately—how they affected him and especially what triggered them. The principle of inhibition, which my teacher Tommy Thompson and I also call *withholding definition*, enabled Alexander to pause and reconsider his commitment to his initial intention or desire. This pause created a space between stimulus and response, enabling him to notice whether the intention relative to his desire to speak was indeed serving the desired outcome. This led him to a moment of choice between his familiar outcome and what he might experience with an unknown and potentially improved outcome. He also discovered that thoughts connect with physical coordination and that the relationship between the head and back via the neck determines the quality, efficiency, and freedom or fixity of movement. When thoughts are open, relaxed, and present to the moment, the relationship of the head and the spine tends to be fluid and free. In other cases it manifests various degrees of tightness, impeding overall coordination and movement relative to our activities.

Practically, in my own teaching, I offer visual observation, verbal feedback, and guided touch to expand students' awareness of choice and possibility relative to their intentions, beliefs, and desires. This teaching process invites students into a deeper sense of freedom, confidence, and presence of being while they consciously choose how to engage effectively in the activities of life. Most recently, I have been particularly interested in how students' thoughts and their relationship to activity influence the ease and presence with which they perform their activities.

Music students who gain insight into their true intentions behind music making are confident and present in the midst of their creative process. This level of awareness opens them up to their potential for free expressivity.

In teaching the Alexander Technique, I am interested in guiding music students through various ways of becoming aware of their states of being while engaged in their professional activity. As students become aware of their attitudes toward themselves, the music, and the audience during music making, they experience how their states of being determine their coordination or “use.” Once they gain this awareness, they are freer to shift and choose their thoughts about themselves and their relationship to their activities, the environment, and their audiences. What follows is more creativity through improved coordination, ease, and self-confidence.

This chapter describes four of the practices I offer in my AT classes for musicians at the Hayes School of Music at Appalachian State University in Boone, NC. My aim is to help release each performer’s creative potential through attending to their thoughts and self-confidence.

Withholding Definition as an Inhibitive Moment

*Withholding definition*¹ teaches students how to observe themselves or the situation, being present to whatever is happening in and around them without amplifying, dismissing, or judging. This distances them from their habitual reactions to specific situations and any previously defined outcomes based on past experiences. When we withhold definition of any experience, there is room for a new experience to emerge. This inhibitive space of withholding definition affords an opportunity for artists to transform challenging situations into experiences where confidence and creative freedom are a reality.

I introduce “withholding definition” to a class with a “can and can’t” game. The sequence goes as follows:

1. To begin, decide if you would like to do this activity standing, lying down, or sitting. Then notice your shape and where you are contacting the floor or chair to establish a sense of position and place in the room. Sense your body's contact with whatever is not you: Notice the floor under your feet, or the ground under your head and back, or the chair under your sit bones. Sense the air and space around you. These are reference points for your relationship with yourself and the room that you can tune into at any moment. This will give you information relative to yourself and the experiences you are about to have.
2. Now think of an activity that is a challenge for you, something you feel you "can't" do, something you've defined as "too difficult" to achieve.
3. As you are thinking about this activity, notice outside sensory stimuli (sense of balance, relationship with sensed support, and what you hear or see). Notice any emotions and what happens to your relationship with yourself and the room.
4. Notice what changes the most when you think, "I can't do X." Once that's registered, let the thought go.
5. Next, engage in thinking about an activity you've been able to complete successfully, something you've done well or something you are looking forward to and confident you can achieve easily.
6. Similarly, notice outside sensory stimuli (sense of balance, relationship with sensed support, and what you hear or see). Notice any emotions and what happens to your relationship with yourself and the environment.
7. Again, notice what shifts the most when you think, "I can do Y." Once that's registered, let the thought go.
8. You now have two contrasting experiences: one relative to something you presently feel incapable of, another relative to an activity that you define as possible to achieve. Notice that

these contrasting experiences are different only because of your perspective on and the definitions you have assigned to each activity.

9. Now, consider the thought “I can’t do X” while you withhold definition, or “inhibit” this thought from being defined as it was earlier. As you withhold definition, connect with any sensory and emotional experiences and allow them to come over you. Then do the same withholding definition of the “I can do Y” thought, noticing your experience and the differences.
10. Finally, to integrate this experience, allow the understanding and insights gained from the experiences of withholding definition to permeate, influence, and transform your initial definition of what you saw as challenging. Notice if your experience of what is possible has shifted as well.

The goal of this exercise is to bring to students an awareness of how their thoughts about an experience define and create this experience. They realize that by using inhibition or withholding definition, they have a choice between their definition, with its resulting habits, or the creative potential that lies in the absence of such a definition. In the absence of definition, they gain insight into new ways of relating to themselves, their environment, and especially their activity.

One student, for instance, felt overwhelmed by the number of activities he had to get done in addition to practicing in order to succeed as a music major. Because he approached these activities with an “I can’t” attitude, he procrastinated. When he withheld definition of the “I can’t” attitude and considered how he enjoys practicing as a process (an “I can” thought), he experienced positive responses in his body (clearer vision, improved sense of balance) and in his emotional response (eagerness) to getting his homework done. He reported that his school activities became simpler, more straightforward, and easier to accomplish while withholding definition. He became able to choose a new habit of completing his work well before the deadline, enjoying it and learning.