

The three questions

Judith Kleinman

The number '3' is a very useful and magical teaching tool. A workshop or a lesson often divides naturally into three – some discussion and practical work on the principals, a lie-down and ending with some playing or movement. The received wisdom is to tell your students what you are going to teach, teach it and then tell them what you have just taught. I usually give people three things to take away from a workshop to think about as their 'homework'.

I like to teach the work through questions. This keeps things open-ended and avoids the habit of young musicians thinking there is yet another thing they have to get right. (We can all use the Technique as something to "beat" ourselves up with, or other people for that matter.) I find a questioning style helps to avoid this. An obvious first question is, "Can I allow my neck to be free?"

I sometimes have phrases and questions that run through the workshop, like Michael Gelb's comforting thoughts, such as, "Can I be calm and confident?" "Do I have relaxed concentration?" Students can come back to these ideas and include emotional space in their idea of good use, another powerful concept on stage.

A great demonstration of positive self-questioning is Lee Warren's lovely idea of using three questions before performing or indeed at any time:

1. Can I see the room around me?
2. Am I breathing?
3. Am I in balance?

This introduces inhibition in such a light way; the discipline of "stopping before you start."

Discussions in the classes vary. Recently we discussed Alexander's idea of 'The Self'. Most of the group related to themselves through their emotions or mental dialogue. We reframed the idea of the self to include the body, spirit and manner of use. Working on ways of experiencing the self with less "mental radio" on can be really useful. I asked the students if they have a mental dialogue going on all the time, most of them do. Eckhart Tolle describes this as "involuntary and compulsive thinking" – a difficult habit if you are playing music. Practical ways to help with this are "palming" where you cover the eyes with the palms of your hands and look into the blackness. Then, as you continue this, noticing your listening from your eardrums, "seeing" from the deeper layers of the retina, noticing the touch of your clothes, the feeling under your hands, the release in your Primary Control. When people take their hands away they see and hear panoramically, stopping over-concentrating or staring. They are more fully present, more conscious and "in the zone" – like Frank Pierce Jones' "expanded field of attention... in which the interaction of the self and the environment are perceived as an ongoing process." Perfect for musicians!

Practical work

Another way of introducing Alexander is as a practical philosophy. The practical work with the group can be a light-hearted way to connect with Alexander's ideas, balancing philosophy with experience. Over time the work can get more sophisticated and their observations more detailed. In this workshop I used a muscle strength test to show the effect of thinking positively about performance. So often young musicians' dialogue is self-sabotaging when going on to play or even while playing. The effect can be noticed just by thinking of a bad or a good performance, noticing the change in our use, our ups and our downs, our mental or emotional habits and Directions. I like to get young people to put hands on each other. They know they are not training to be Alexander teachers but making contact in a light friendly way, heightening the awareness of what's going on in themselves and each other. I particularly like an exercise shown to me by Alex and Joan Murray. After demonstrating where the Atlanto-Occipital joint is and explaining its significance, we pair up to explore the effects of gripping the floor with the feet, holding the tummy in and breathing, making a false smile. You can see how much the head-neck-back relationship is affected by these other tensions. It's fun for students to see how interconnected they are.

Another exercise is to ask everyone to take a breath with their knees braced and then with their legs unlocked and to experience the difference. (Many teenagers seem to lock their hips, knees and ankles and hold their breath.) Showing young people that the Alexander Technique is a tool for realising what you are doing as well as what you are deciding not to do. I finished the practical part of the workshop with the first 'swings' that you might learn in Tai Chi or any martial art; gentle easy movement.

These exercises are only an idea for introducing the work to young musicians, balancing a workshop to be educational, entertaining, and inspiring. As we go along, we do more "Classic F.M." work with individuals and their instruments and using other resources such as "body mapping." My plan is always to create a relaxed working atmosphere helping to get people interested. A nice definition of happiness is "Doing something that you are interested in, well."

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