John Dewey and F. M. Alexander: Habit and performance skills

Malcolm Williamson

Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester, UK

In a PhD thesis by McCormack, *John Dewey and F. Matthias Alexander: A Neglected Influence*, Alexander is identified as a significant influence on Dewey’s philosophical thought. The 25-year association is re-examined in the light of what the two men say about the nature of habit, and its relevance to performing artists and skill development.

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Many promising students enter music colleges with long-standing habits of undue effort and muscular tension that have become part of their practice routine. When these habits are not recognized and addressed they remain obstacles to optimal technical and artistic achievement and are likely to curtail what might otherwise have been a successful and fulfilling career.

The fact that musculoskeletal and anxiety-related problems are suffered by some musicians and not by others indicates that there are personal predisposing and causal factors at work (Ballard *et al.* 1997). Here, I propose that these factors are certain acquired patterns of habit involving inappropriate muscular tension and associated attitudes of mind that disturb the natural functioning of the individual as an integrated whole.

It may seem odd to include both physical and mental problems that are usually considered separately. However, the continuum between mental-physical is a feature of this paper that re-examines a 25-year association between John Dewey, America’s pre-eminent philosopher and educationist, and F. Matthias Alexander, writer and originator of the Alexander technique (see Figure 1).

In a remarkable PhD thesis by Eric McCormack (1958), *John Dewey and F. Matthias Alexander: A Neglected Influence*, Alexander is identified as a significant influence on Dewey’s philosophical thought. When asked by his daughter to identify highlights in his career for a biography, Dewey wrote:
My theories of mind-body, of the co-ordination of the active elements of the self and of the place of ideas in inhibition and control of overt action required [for confirmation] contact with the work of F. M. Alexander and in later years his brother, A. R., to transform them into realities” (cited in Martin 2002, p. 286).

MAIN CONTRIBUTION

From his experiences in lessons with Alexander, Dewey became aware of how thinking could usefully be applied in the performance of everyday activities and bring about positive changes to unwanted habitual patterns of behavior. As the vehicle of his instruction, Alexander focused on habits of the way we carry ourselves and move (Mixon 1980). Acts such as sit-stand are discretionary (we can perform them at will), but how they are performed is governed by an individual’s capacity, skill, and habit.

In his masterful discussion of habit in Human Nature and Conduct (1922), Dewey puts the case for habit as the unit of analysis in the control of action and as the key to reliable skill learning:

The essence of habit is an acquired predisposition to ways or modes of response, not to particular acts except as, under special conditions, these express a way of behaving. (pp. 40-41).
Dewey’s meaning is close to its primary sense of the way something is done: “a tendency or disposition to act in a particular way...” (Collins English Dictionary 2000).

Dewey discovered that, when it came to ways of moving, he could not carry out aims or intentions contrary to his habit without further training and practice. Habits are analogous to skills, particularly, in the context of what Alexander dealt with. Dewey wrote of:

the most humiliating experience of my life, intellectually speaking. For to find that one is unable to execute directions, including inhibitory ones, in doing such a seemingly simple act as to sit down, when one is using all the mental capacity which one prides himself upon possessing, is not an experience congenial to one’s vanity (Alexander 1985, p. 10).

**Fixed and adaptable habits**

Alexander and others identify two kinds of habit: (1) fixed habits acquired without thought or planning and (2) adaptable habits that are consciously controlled and can be altered at will—what Dewey called “intelligently controlled” habits (cf. Alexander 1910, pp. 74-75, and Alexander 1996, p. 54). Mechanization and propulsive power are properties of all habit, but it does not follow that habit must be mindless. Musicians needs to avoid thoughtless, mechanical, and fixed habits that create strain and lead to impoverished technical and artistic outcomes for the artist (Leiberman 1991).

**The interpenetration of habits**

A reason why habits are so persistent and difficult to change is because of what Dewey calls their “interpenetration.” Mixon (1980) writes:

This is especially true of the habits Alexander worked with. The way we carry ourselves and move is something that enters into everything we do, that is involved in every waking and sleeping moment (p. 182).

We are the totality of our habits: our habits are us. Alexander (1985) was aware of this when investigating the cause of his own vocal problems:

...I came to see that any attempt to [prevent my harmful vocal habits]...involved my bringing into play the use of all those parts of the organism required for the activities incident to the act of reciting, such as
standing, walking, using the arms and hands for gesture, interpretation, etc. (p. 32, italics added).

**Conscious inhibition**

Dewey (1922) writes that without reliable control of habits, simply wishing to do something differently is on a par with primitive magic or superstition in its neglect of attention to the means that are involved in reaching an end. Habit cannot be changed directly, simply by an act of will for this “puts into operation the very conditions that are the source of the experienced trouble, thereby strengthening them and at most [merely] changing the outward form in which they manifest themselves...” (cited in McCormack 1958, p. 129).

The principle of inhibition (“withholding consent”) forms the cornerstone of Alexander's technique. It might be compared to John Locke’s notion of “the power to forbear” or Benjamin Libet’s “power of veto,” but Alexander was the first to demonstrate its practical significance (c. 1894) as a fundamental principle in the control of human behavior. It verified something that Dewey (1938) considered of primary importance on the intellectual level: “the old phrase ‘stop and think’ is sound psychology” (p. 74). Old habits must be prevented (inhibited) and time given to refashion the underlying preconditions in accordance with the expression of the new adaptable habit.

Habits are complex organizations of the self, tools, and materials. Alexander’s technique deals initially with the self, restoring functional integrity and bringing about the “harmonious relationing” of the parts of the body. Both physical and mental changes are necessary in order for a change of habit, and as reliable sensory experiences are necessary to form new mental concepts, the individual is often unable to accomplish the changes without assistance.

The Alexander technique has been taught as a foundation skill in music and drama conservatories since the 1950s. It is usually regarded as a way of improving posture, but this is just what can be seen. By applying the technique in daily activities a particular plane of awareness is reached. Alexander (2000, 2004) called this “conscious control.” Dewey referred to it as “thinking in activity,” a sort of in-the-moment impartial monitoring of one’s own activity (Alexander 1985).

Many authors other than Alexander and Dewey have suggested that enhanced self-awareness is essential if we are to be able to do as we intend. These include Todd (1937) and Shusterman (2008), for example. Without reliable control of adaptable habit (i.e. the “means”), it is impossible to reach one’s goals consistently and with certainty. Dewey (1922) used the example of a man who is told to “stand straight” to illustrate his general law of habit:
A man who can stand properly does so, and only a man who can, does (p. 29).

In fact, this is a reworking of Alexander’s arguments for “a boy who stoops...[and] is told to ‘stand up straight’” (Alexander 1910, p. 191, and Alexander 1996, pp. 90-91.) Dewey (1922) continues:

Only when a man can already perform an act of standing straight does he know what it is like to have a right posture and only then can he summon the idea required for proper execution. The act must come before the thought, and a habit before an ability to evoke the thought at will. Ordinary psychology reverses the actual state of affairs (pp. 30-31).

Musicians ideally should be taught from first principles how to cultivate and develop the transferable skills of impartial self monitoring, inhibition of unwanted habits, and how to restore and continually develop better use of the self. The promise of cure often holds more immediate appeal than this slower but surer educational process. Those who rely on quick fixes, seeking palliatives that deal with symptoms and not root causes, often side-track their attention and delay investigation of the intelligent control of means.

When the Alexander technique was first introduced into a music college in the 1950s, Royal College of Music singing professors recorded their conclusions as follows (Barlow 1978):

In each case [following a course of Alexander lessons] there has been a marked physical improvement, which was usually reflected vocally and dramatically. It was a revelation to discover that tricks of behaviour could be eliminated in a comparatively short space of time once the student learned to control his tensional balance from the head-neck region.... In all cases students since re-education are easier to teach, and can take and carry out stage directions with greater ease. The students seem to become aware of themselves in a new way. Each student reacted in a different characteristic way. For example, those who had been over-anxious to please authority discovered that they could be themselves with impunity, ceasing to be such model students, but becoming better performers... In our opinion, this approach is the best means we have yet encountered for solving the artist’s problem of communication and should form the basis of his training (p. 195).
IMPLICATIONS

Until teachers and members of the caring professions recognize the influence of unwanted habit and that individuals can be taught and learn how to change it, then their methods will be incomplete and less effective than they might otherwise be.

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Address for correspondence

Malcolm Williamson, Royal Northern College of Music, 124 Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9RD; Email: williamm@rncm.ac.uk

References