

Teaching Flute Lessons with Alexander Principles

an excerpt from Stephanie Kalka's Final Paper

The Alexander Technique is a tool for change that helps to identify overuse in the muscles of the body. It can help flute teachers and their students immensely. Whether or not she is certified as an Alexander teacher, a flute teacher can learn to apply the principles of the Alexander Technique during a lesson. This premise led to my final paper. I hope to impart some of the principles that have profoundly changed my life and to encourage flute teachers to use these principles for themselves and with their students.

If you are a teacher reading this paper, it means that you have a wish to improve your skill, whether it is for yourself or for your students. Already you have an open mind, a willingness to try something new. This is the perfect opportunity to give the teacher suggestions that apply an enhanced set of aims. I will begin by defining the terms Awareness, Inhibition, and Direction and relate these ideas to your teaching studio.

We can assume that your student wants to have a beautiful sound and solid technical skill and you have that wish for him as well. There are two ways to accomplish these goals: 1. By falling into the habit of using excess tension, or 2. Through the use of ease.

Every flutist uses tension to play the instrument. By *excess tension* (as noted in the first category), I am describing those flutists who (usually unconsciously) use more muscle tension than what is needed. It is understandable that we may rely on excess tension to perform. Many flutists have hectic schedules and use extra strain to help them conquer fatigue during a performance. Others may use it because it is a habit that provides comfort and comfort of any kind is welcome during performances. Some flutists feel that excess tension gives them an extra edge or helps them block out nervousness or even to block out the audience itself. The reasons for relying on excess tension are numerous, but does it really help us? For some musicians, the use of excess muscle tension does not cause a problem. However, for others (myself included), relying on excess tension causes repetitive stress injuries. Therefore, for the flutist whose playing habits fit those of the *excess tension* category, the Alexander Technique plays an extremely integral part in preventing the development of repetitive strain injuries. In addition, the Technique can be informative, invaluable, and even career-saving after a repetitive strain injury has surfaced.

People whose performances fall into the second category (playing through the use of ease) are often called "naturals." They are amazingly gifted, and yet there is a way that each of us can obtain some of their qualities. Those same levels of grace and fluidity, as seen in people like James Galway and Fred Astaire, can be learned. The Alexander Technique can give you the tools to have more ease in your playing and, should you choose to apply it further, ease within all aspects of your life. The Technique can support your teaching and aid your students.

I. Beginning

When you teach, consider the *whole* student (mind and body). This includes but is not limited to: ease within the joints, using the necessary amount of muscle tension, effortless breathing, a mind that is present, and eyes that see their surroundings. Therefore, teaching the *whole* student begins by letting freedom in the body take precedence over the quality of sound—over making any sound at all. You and your student must be willing, at times, to walk away from the flute and do another activity instead. This is the only way to diffuse habits of tension and allow more healthful patterns to develop. When ease within your whole system becomes the priority, a new, full tone is allowed to develop. To accomplish this, you can apply the three main principles of the Alexander Technique: Awareness, Inhibition, and Direction.

The Alexander definition of “Awareness” includes knowing how you move your body and having consciousness in and around your body, in other words, having a clear kinesthetic perception. Through *awareness* you will on occasion discover a habit. You may decide not to continue with the habit, so the next step, according to the Alexander Technique, is to pause. Pausing is necessary to override a habit. If you notice a habit and decide—without a pause—to stop the habit, you will quickly find that you have slipped back into your habit. The pause gives you time to reorganize your system and it is called “Inhibition.” By *inhibiting* a reaction to a stimulus, you give yourself time to check in with your system. For example: your phone rings (the stimulus), and instead of rushing to answer it (reaction), you *inhibit*. In other words, you pause and see if you are breathing (or if you held your breath when you heard the phone) and allow your neck to be free. After inhibiting, you are able to pick up the phone in an easeful way. This reorganization does not require much time and yet it will make an incredible difference in how you feel. The reorganization, itself, is called “Direction.” It is accomplished with a set of instructions *not to be carried out*. This means that the instructions, or “directions,” are a set of wishes you have for yourself and so you wish for yourself to be free—in mind and body. Once these “directions” have been spoken or thought, you may move in a new, non-habitual way.

FM Alexander’s directions begin with relaxing the neck. Most people have felt neck pain at some time in their lives. To get an idea of what a tense neck feels like, place a hand on the back of your neck and sit in a chair and then stand up. It is likely that you felt some stress. Pause now and *direct* your neck to relax. You can do this by thinking “I wish my neck to be soft.” When you feel an undoing of tension, sit and stand again. Notice if anything changed.

Alexander’s second direction is to “let your head go forward and up.” This does not mean forward in space, but a forward tilt in the axis of your head. When your neck is free, or relaxed, your head naturally nods forward slightly. This is because your skull is not centered above the tip of your spine. Most of your skull is in front of the spine (if we consider the side with your face to be the front). Hence, more of the skull’s weight is in front, and it is designed to nod forward slightly. The *up* is the space created between the tip of your spine and your skull when your neck is free and your head is poised. It is a feeling of lightness and accessibility. Once your neck is soft, *direct* your head to move forward and up. Let each wish be in this order.

The third direction Alexander devised was for the back to widen. When you have the desire for your back to widen, you are including the wish to breathe freely and the wish that your spine lengthen within its curves. So, once you have allowed your neck to be free and your head to move forward and up, let your back widen.

II. Finding Balance

1. Back and Down

2. Over-straightened

3. Balanced



To begin to improve the daily use of your body, you must understand how your body works against gravity. When your whole self is poised and easeful, your body will naturally spring up against gravity. You will know your entire system is easeful when your neck is relaxed, your head moves forward and up, and your back is widening. This is the opposite of a collapsed head, neck, and torso that appear to be defeated by gravity, or what Alexander teachers call being “back and down.”

Here are three examples of head/neck/back relationships while in an upright position. (View from left to right.) 1. The first image is of a head back and down. As you can see, the spine would become compressed in this position and breathing would be taxing. People who appear this way may be tired and feel that collapsing as pictured will be restful. The extra effort needed to breathe and move in this state would make playing the flute a difficult endeavor. 2. The second image is of a head over-straightening. People sometimes pull their spines into this position in an effort to have “good posture.” The spine is not allowed to have its cervical curve and it would take extra tension to maintain this arrangement. Once again, breathing and moving would require excess tension. The extra tension travels into the shoulders, arms, and fingers making technical passages a nightmare. 3. The third image is of a balanced head. Keep in mind that this is not a position to be held, but a free neck where the head can constantly balance and rebalance as you move. Just as a tall building is designed to move, so should you. As you are “standing still,” you can let your whole self be free so that your body moves slightly in what Alexander teachers call the “standing dance.” Your *head/neck/back* relationship is just a part of that dance. When your head is balanced on your torso, you can breathe and move with freedom. FM Alexander called this head/neck/back relationship *Primary Control*. Primary Control is the body's basic, innate mechanism for support and poise. It ensures that your limbs can move freely with minimal effort and without compromising your free neck, balanced head, and lengthening spine.