

*Functional Awareness: Experiential anatomy as a Useful Tool to support FM Alexander's Principles of Inhibition and Direction*

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The Alexander Technique is a movement reeducation practice (somatic practice) in which our thinking facilitates release in the body's musculature to allow for ease in daily movement. In lessons, Alexander teachers facilitate an experience in sensory appreciation, a dynamic balance in movement, and an integration of the breathing mechanism by using the principles of inhibition and direction. Alexander lessons often provide a profound experience for the student, yet in early lessons it may not be an experience in meaningful learning.

David Ausubel, educational psychologist, describes meaningful learning as symbolically expressed ideas, related in a substantive manner, to one's relative cognitive structure. Simple said meaningful learning occurs when a new concept is linked to prior knowledge. If the student's prior knowledge is 'faulty' in a sensory and cognitive fashion the student has a misinformed relative cognitive structure or a shaky foundation.

Let the neck be free, to allow the torso to lengthen and widen, the knees to release forward and away and the shoulders to release out. These are a series of symbolically expressed ideas known in the Alexander Technique as 'direction'. The student is instructed to 'think' this language while the teacher provides hands on the students to facilitate an experience of release of habitual tension. When a student begins AT lessons these words have little context to their previous knowledge base. The teacher uses this language, as well as their hands and often a mirror to help provide context and a structural framework for the words to have 'meaning'. Over a series of lessons this language elicits a conditioned response that allows for release of unnecessary tension and provides a dynamic balance for efficient movement potential.

Functional Awareness (a method in experiential anatomy) is a tool to provide context in a student's learning framework and provides a structural understanding of the body. Functional Awareness is a process whereby the teacher provides anatomical, neurological or biomechanical information to a student in a simple manner, so the student can link the hands on experience of the lesson with a deeper understanding of their own functioning. Functional awareness, like 'hands on' provides substantive context to Alexander's principles of inhibition and direction in order to deepen meaningful learning. It does not replace hands on learning, the primary directions, or individual guided instruction. It enhances and buoys the journey of the 'means whereby' and the primary principles of inhibition and direction.

The role of Functional Awareness is:

- To educate one's sensory appreciation through simple anatomical, neurological or biomechanical information
- To facilitate the student's ability let go of skepticism and encourage acceptance of the new experience provided by the 'hands on'...to allow for a 'lengthening of stature'

Functional Awareness does not replace 'hands on' work. It is not even needed at all in order to teach a perfectly masterful Alexander lesson. Functional Awareness does deepen a student's understanding of their patterns of 'use' and provides tools to enhance meaningful learning. Often it is easier for the student to let go of the fear that binds them to their habitual patterns when principles of functional awareness are introduced.