

No 10 Naumburg and Dewey

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1. During the last term or so, I have been looking at how understanding simple engineering principles can be helpful in thinking about what we do as Alexander teachers.
2. I am now going on to a more general approach and a look at the wider scientific and intellectual or philosophical context in which the AT evolved. Alexander himself was not a scientist but he had a great deal of respect for science.
3. He was also a thorough-going rationalist. Constructive conscious control was what he believed in and he hated the idea of fringe science and quackery. I think we can safely say Alexander would have been appalled by the present-day association of the AT with alternative therapies.
4. So in the next set of talks I am going to be telling you something about the big main-stream names and personalities who have been associated with the AT.
5. We have a rich heritage and a lot to be proud of in it. So I think it is important that we know something about it.
6. Among the list of big names who are connected in one way or with the Technique and whom I am going to tell you something about include:
 - John Dewey an extremely prominent American philosopher and educationalist with a deep interest in science;
 - Sir Charles Sherrington the founder of modern neuroscience; Professor Rudolph Magnus – who did the definitive research on the working of the postural reflexes;
 - Professor George Ellett Coghill who did research on the embryonic development of the nervous system;
 - Professor Nikolaas Tinbergen who was awarded the Nobel Prize for ethology in 1973; and
 - Professor Benjamin Libet, a neuroscientist, who produced some interesting findings which some AT teachers think provide significant scientific underpinning for what we do as AT teachers.
7. I will also fill you in on Raymond Dart, the world-famous paleoanthropologist who became a fan of Alexander and invented the Dart Procedures which some of you know about;

and Aldous Huxley, a very fashionable British novelist of the period between the First and Second World Wars. He became a major supporter of Alexander and the Technique and is frequently mentioned in the AT literature.

8. Apart from knowing a bit about who they were and what they did, I think it is useful for all of us look at why these undoubtedly clever people were drawn to the AT and whether this has any lessons for us in the way we present the Technique and think about it ourselves.
9. Although most of these people were well-known and influential in their time things have moved on and it is usually impossible to get hold of their publications in ordinary bookshops today. But I would mention that there is a very useful on-line network of second-hand book bookshops where I have been able to get hold of most of the source-material for these talks.
10. It is called abebooks.co.uk and it is my first port of call when I am looking for old or new books. It is so good that Amazon have just bought it. So if any of you feel like delving further into any of these people, it is worth having a look.
11. My first major figure is John Dewey. He was one of Alexander's most prominent supporters and they were personal friends for almost forty years. I think you could say that Dewey did more than anyone else to promote the AT in the early decades of the 20th century.
12. But before getting on to Dewey himself, the story of how Alexander and Dewey first met and became friends is in itself quite interesting. It involves three women who all played a major part in the early promotion of the Technique.
13. The one most directly involved in the initial meeting was an American called Margaret Naumburg (1890-1983). Apart from introducing Alexander to Dewey, she was a very interesting woman in her own right.
14. She was born in New York in 1890 and did her undergraduate studies at a small women's liberal arts university in New York called Barnard College and after that she went to the famous women's university, Vassar College, which is also in New York.
15. She then went on to do graduate studies in Columbia University in New York where one of her professors was John Dewey.

16. After her work with Dewey, she came to London and studied with Sidney and Beatrice Webb at the London School of Economics. The Webbs were prominent social reformers; they were among the founders of the Fabian Society; they set up the London School of Economics and were among the early people influential in the founding of the Labour Party. So Margaret was right in the heart of the progressive social movement in England at the time.
17. She was interested in education, presumably because of her work with Dewey, and went on to study with Maria Montessori in Rome. While there she met a woman called Ethel Webb who came from the famous Mappin and Webb jewellery and silversmith family – they've still got a shop in Regent Street.
18. Ethel Webb had trained to be a concert pianist but had had to give it up because she developed a bad back. She heard about Alexander and went for lessons with him. The lessons made such a dramatic difference that she decided to give up on the idea of piano playing and devote her life to helping Alexander.
19. He took her up on this and trained her in the Technique. She became his first qualified teacher in 1914. She weaves in and out of Alexander's story for the next forty years until her death in 1952 at the age of 86.
20. When Margaret Naumburg met her, she was studying with Maria Montessori because she thought there were affinities between the teachings of Alexander and Montessori. So when they met, Ethel Webb told Margaret she had to have lessons with Alexander.
21. Also studying with Montessori at the time was another young woman called Irene Tasker who had been suffering from a bad stoop. Ethel Webb also persuaded her to go to Alexander. The difference he made to her was also so dramatic that she too decided to devote herself to helping him and she also weaves in and out of his story for the rest of Alexander's life and beyond it until her death at the age of 93 in 1977. She gave the Alexander Memorial Lecture right here in Lansdowne Road in 1967.
22. When Margaret Naumburg came back to London, she duly had her lessons with Alexander. She was so impressed with him that she offered to help him promote his work if he ever

wanted to come to New York. This happened to be something he was very interested in doing.

23. She then went back to the New York where she married the now-forgotten novelist, social historian and political activist, Waldo Frank, but they were divorced in 1924.

24. Naumburg and her husband moved in avant garde circles in New York. She was interested in Jung, the occult, and psychodrama and she founded a progressive children's school called the Walden School in 1915. This was very advanced for its time in which, according to an extract from a biography written by her son which I found through Google,

The emotional development of children, fostered through encouragement of spontaneous creative expression and self-motivated learning, should take precedence over the traditional intellectual approach to the teaching of a standardized curriculum.

25. She went on to become one of the founders and leading lights of the Art Therapy movement in the United States. She lived to the age of 93, and died only in 1983. It is easy to get drawn into her story, but the main thing from our point of view was her enthusiasm for Alexander.

26. After the outbreak of World War I, in 1914, the number of Alexander's pupils fell off and he felt that this would be a good time to go to America.

27. He left his practice in the care of his brother, Albert Redden Alexander, who is usually known as AR, and Ethel Webb and set sail for New York in September 1914 in the *Lusitania*. That was the ship which was sunk off the south coast of Ireland by a German submarine nine months later.

28. When Alexander arrived in New York in 1914, Margaret Naumburg delivered on her promise to help him. She arranged teaching rooms, fixed up contacts for him and recommended pupils to him from her big circle of prominent people. It was an ideal beginning and Alexander quickly became well-known in very influential circles.

29. One of things she decided was that he must meet John Dewey. During the following year, she arranged a dinner party where Alexander met Dewey and they immediately hit it off together.

30. As for Margaret, Alexander basically did not approve of her educational methods and there seems to have been a cooling of relations between them.

31. He does not mention her by name but it is clear that his criticisms of child education in Chapter VII of MSI were aimed directly at her. He says

Let me describe the practical procedure of a certain type of "free-drawing" lesson. Pencils, papers and the usual paraphernalia are placed on tables or desks in different parts of the schoolroom, in the hope that the child may be tempted to use them in drawing. Then one day, a pupil takes up a pencil and makes an attempt to draw, another follows his example and so on, until all the pupils have made some kind of effort in this direction....

I must confess that I have been shocked to witness the work that goes on in these schools.¹

32. It sounds very crusty and reactionary but he had a serious point. He was basically worried that allowing children to develop their own ways of using pens and pencils and other implements to perform complex tasks like drawing can embed harmful habits of use from a very early age. It is still an interesting argument.

33. But despite the cooling of personal relations, Margaret Naumburg seems to have stuck with the Technique. Michael Bloch, who wrote the biography of Alexander, says that in a book on her educational ideas published in 1928, she devoted twelve pages to the Technique.

34. This is all by way of introduction to John Dewey and his importance to the Alexander and the Technique. One of the nice things about preparing these talks is the way one comes across these very interesting people who were involved in one way or another with the Technique.

35. But next time I will get on to Alexander's big friend Dewey. His meeting with Alexander certainly changed the course of Dewey's own life. And, as I said, it had a big impact in getting the Technique known and respected in America.

¹ Alexander (1910)p79

36. I will finish today by telling you who our John Dewey was not. Some of us have wondered whether he had anything to do with the Dewey Decimal System of Classification for books. You see in the numbers on the spines of books in libraries. It is apparently still the world's most widely used system for classifying library books.
37. That was a different Dewey. He was also American and was called Melvil Dewey. He lived from 1851 to 1931 and by coincidence was chief librarian at Columbia University for a time. He was a big advocate of public libraries and simplified spelling. He apparently wanted to spell his name Dui. But as far as we know, he had nothing whatsoever to do with the Technique.
38. So next week, it's on to the real John Dewey.

References

ALEXANDER, F. M. (1910) *Man's supreme inheritance* - Mouritz, London (1996 edition)