

# Professionalisation and the Alexander Technique

*2003, revised 2019 and 2024*

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*There are as many certified charlatans and exploiters of people as there are uncertified.*

—Carl Rogers (1973)

Over 20 years ago, a debate was raging among Alexander Technique teachers in the UK about a perceived need to professionalise and conform to the then-government's wish to achieve greater regulation of Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM). Leaving aside the question as to whether or not the Alexander Technique sits comfortably within the CAM framework anyway, many of us at the time were concerned with the direction the Alexander community was being driven, feeling that the requirements of state-sanctioned regulation worked against diversity of practice and were in direct opposition to the principles on which our work is based.

A couple of decades later and the landscape in the UK is somewhat different. The government-driven standardising impulse has quietened (at least with regards to CAM) and there is a wider diversity of approaches and organisations representing Alexander teachers than there has ever been before. Unsurprisingly, government sources of funding and the promised National Health Service clients that were held out as a carrot to motivate the self-regulation project have never materialised in a significant sense for any CAM practices, whether they professionalised or not, and the attention of government has moved onto other things.

I was surprised, therefore, to receive an enquiry from Australia wondering whether an article I wrote on these matters for *Direction Journal* in 2003 might be republished in the *AuStat* magazine. Apparently these perennial issues have raised their head Down Under. Nothing loathe, I dug out the article, interested to see how I would feel about what I wrote all those years ago.

I found my views have mellowed, but not that much. Some of the arguments which seemed very important to me back then now seem less so, while others have gained greater prominence. So, although I still find myself in broad agreement with what I wrote in 2003, I have re-written the article to better reflect my current views in the hope it adds something of value to the debate.

## **What is a Profession?**

Of course the word profession can be used to describe any area of paid work ('what is your profession?'), but when we talk of 'professionalisation' or a need to 'professionalise' we are using the word in a more specific sense which suggests demarcation of territory, official recognition, and barriers to entry. Examples of such 'true' professions are law, medicine, teaching, architecture and social work. To enter these fields requires state-sanctioned training and assessment, and ongoing surveillance once qualified—usually justified by a need to maintain standards and protect the public.

In fields where the consequences of mistakes or malpractice are extremely severe, such as architecture or medicine, the need to legally enforce minimum standards and to punish those who fall short may be a necessary precaution. But there is a trade-off involved because professionalisation does not come without costs and problems of its own to practitioners, clients and the wider society.

Macdonald (1995) points out that a profession is an effective monopoly which has developed a special relationship with the state. This relationship involves a *regulative bargain* which is strongly influenced by the prevailing political culture. Professions provide a service which is perceived to be valuable to their clients, and they aim to achieve social closure—in other words to exclude people—through the maintenance of a closed social world with requirements for entry, stereotyped ways of interacting, and rules and codes of behaviour. As such they seek to gain maximum advantage for their members. In particular, the regulative bargains professions make aim to achieve greater power, prestige, social status and payment for their members through:

- Reciprocal connections with elite institutions and individuals—academics, civil servants, politicians and other policy makers.

- The granting of a monopoly or quasi-monopoly.
- Access to state funds, either directly or indirectly.
- Access to clients in schools, colleges and the health and social care system.

They will pay for these privileges by fitting in with, and actively furthering the establishment's agenda and values through:

- The adoption of state-approved approaches to accreditation and training.
- Tacit agreement to not seriously challenge or question the politics and power dynamics of the health, education and social care systems in which the profession's members wish to work.
- The enforcement of state-approved auditing and surveillance on the profession's members and clients in an effort to ensure 'accountability'.

Broadly speaking, at the heart of any professionalisation project is a move away from the margins towards *respectability*. Modern states are run by a culturally dominant group with certain values in common. By professionalising one is essentially seeking to move towards recognition by, and membership of, this elite group.

### **Ripe for Professionalisation?**

Before starting a professionalisation project of our own it might be a good idea to pause and think about what it is we actually do—what sort of practice we are engaged in, and whether the professional worldview is a good fit for this type of endeavour.

One thing that almost anyone who has spent time in the Alexander world will have noticed is how hard it is to pin down precisely what we are up to. In spite of a few teachers' insistence that there is one right way (oddly enough *theirs*) or that it is all terribly simple if you just read the books, a century of diverging schools, approaches, and ways of conceptualising the work point to the fact that we are engaged in a practice that's rather more interesting than 'right ways' and 'wrong ways'. Ask a room of Alexander teachers what

they do and you will likely get a series of quite varied answers. This is not a problem—it's a symptom of the richness and depth in the work. It points to the conclusion that we're involved with something whose ends and means cannot be clearly and unambiguously defined. This is not surprising, because we are dealing with things that are experiential, concerned with the whole, often tacit, and which need to be integrated by each individual in their own way. We are not fixing a tooth or giving exercises to help a knee to heal leaving our students to carry on with their lives just as before. Rather we are engaged in exploring in a fundamental sense how we meet the world and interact with it as a being. This is a deeply intimate and personal thing. We can see a physiotherapist and leave exactly the same person as we were when we began. But to engage with the Alexander Technique is to change and grow as a *person*. In this sense, the practice (if not the theory) strays into metaphysical and quasi-spiritual territory and informs an evolving and practical personal philosophy of life.

Is this sort of intimate, thoughtful, contingent, re-making of the self-as-it-meets-the-world a suitable target for state control or oversight? I would suggest not, and particularly if we take the view (hardly unjustified from the vantage point of 2024) that the state apparatus is not necessarily well-intentioned towards humanity in general, nor a safe and neutral receptacle for basic human rights, dignity and values.

## **Competencies and Reductionism**

It was no surprise to learn that one of the aims of the Alexander Technique professionalisation project in Australia is to develop ways to assess trainees that are compatible with government vocational education and training accreditation regulators. However, in seeking the approval of a state-sanctioned education system, we would be well advised to ask what are the aims and values of that system, and whether these are compatible with what the Technique is and what we are seeking to achieve as teachers.

Over the last few decades, the trend in almost all state-sanctioned education and training (and training in private industry also) has been towards a 'competencies' based approach in which an occupation is broken down into minutely detailed and prescriptive sub-procedures which can then be tested

for individually. For example an apprentice plumber might have as one of his competencies ‘unload tools and safety gear from van’. Long lists of such competencies are produced for each level of attainment, and being able to show ‘competence’ in all of them is considered proof that the individual is competent at the job as a whole. It is a relentlessly reductive approach which has its roots in behaviourism and industrial working practices designed specifically (and deliberately) to produce an efficient, auditable and controllable workforce. It is the application of machine production philosophy to human beings.

This philosophy of work and training has spread unchecked throughout the Western world until in almost every field it has become the norm to not only be assessed in such terms during and after training, but to be under rigorous surveillance and subjected to continuous auditing procedures throughout ones working life in an attempt to ensure officially sanctioned outcomes are maintained. Under such systems *ends* become all important; the means by which those ends are gained are not considered nearly so much, and the quality and by-products of the process are sidelined and become increasingly irrelevant. The individual’s role in the system is to reproduce behaviour in a set way to a formula prescribed by others. Spontaneity, freedom and idiosyncrasy are sidelined.

It’s not difficult to see what is wrong with such competency-based systems from the perspective of the Alexander Technique:

- They prioritise ends over means.
- They are *actively* hostile to the process-orientated ways of working that are at the heart of teaching the technique and training teachers.
- They operate from a reductionist rather than integrated perspective.
- In practice, they make creativity and divergence within the imposed competency framework almost impossible.

As an Alexander teacher, one might wonder whether the urge to so tightly control and monitor the work of individuals is an aspect of a way of being which is the *cause* rather than the solution to many of our ills, based as it is on lack of trust in people and in life, fear of spontaneity and freedom, and

the need to dominate, monitor and control rather than allow for process, unfolding and contingency.

We should know that to hope human beings can codify and control the way towards true health is unrealistic, because our fundamental problems are a *product* of such controlling behaviour, which can be seen as a habitual response to the fear of disorder and loss of control. In this misguided pursuit of fragmented, ends-focussed approaches to societal ills, society is becoming a more controlled and controlling place. It is less and less an environment which enables people to 'allow the right thing to do itself', on either a personal or organisational level. In fact, such an approach to life would be in direct contradiction to the logic of the system, and fundamentally incompatible with the worldview on which it is based. In this new social order, 'doing' reigns supreme. Because of this I believe that choosing to professionalise would inevitably involve a degree of collusion with the end-gaining and controlling agenda of the modern state. It would mean the forming of an alliance with damaging cultural forces which are opposed to the most basic principles of our work.

## **Culture and Counter-Culture**

One of the cultural strengths of the Alexander Technique is that it has always straddled two worlds. While F.M. appealed to science and liked to gain recognition from mainstream doctors, he was also a maverick, a visionary and, in a sense, a secular prophet preaching radical transformation. Representatives from both these poles have been drawn to his work ever since, and the creative tension between them has helped the Technique to evolve and grow. The visionaries and rebels have pushed boundaries and kept the deeper implications of our work in sight: the scientists and academics have questioned in their own way and kept things grounded and real. This later function is important, and the impatience of some of its proponents with the more counter-cultural elements in our sub-culture is understandable up to a point. However, the counter-cultural side also has much to offer. Mowbray (1995) writes of the importance of maintaining such a counter-cultural space in society. With regard to psychotherapy, he points out:

Because it addresses the ‘normal’, the movement that carries that process must stay on the margin and not be ‘absorbed’, not be tempted by the carrots of recognition, respectability and financial security into reverting to the mainstream but rather remain—on the ‘fringe’—as a source that stimulates, challenges convention and ‘draws out’ the unrealised potential for ‘being’ in the members of that society.

Such arguments are equally valid for the Alexander Technique which also addresses the ‘normal’ (end-gaining behaviour, the belief in doing and fierce top-down control as the solution to personal and societal ills) and calls it into question. I suggest that to effectively and ethically question ways of being which are deeply embedded within society and its structures, we should balance calls for greater respectability with an understanding that, without a balancing counter-cultural presence, respectability leads to ossification, rigidity, and unhelpful social hierarchy which works against the openness and freedom so many of us associate with our involvement with the work.

The process of professionalisation works against diversity within our field, and mitigates against the fringe which is what enables us to be a force for *real* change, as opposed to becoming just another professionally administered panacea for the individual which leaves the deeper context of the client’s problem untouched and unchallenged.

## **Standards and Safeguards**

Proponents of professionalisation and regulation often make claims about their benefits in terms of protecting the public from dangerous practitioners and, related to this, maintaining training standards. On the surface, these claims have a common sense appeal. However, there are already laws against harming people and misrepresenting one’s business. We are not engaged in a particularly dangerous activity, as the very low cost of Alexander teacher insurance premiums (only £80 a year in the UK in 2024) bears witness. Most of what we do is more on a par with being a singing teacher than a doctor! To make a case for regulation to ensure the public’s safety stand up to scrutiny (and hence justify the upheaval of values and organisational relationships required) would demand strong evidence the public is being substantially harmed by the activities of Alexander teachers, that greater regulation would prevent this happening to a significant degree, and that there were no

other, less intrusive, way of addressing the problem. There is little evidence to support any of these claims.

No doubt there are a few rogue practitioners who behave in an unethical or abusive way. This is the case in *any* field of work, whether regulated or not, and it cannot be solved simply by greater regulation. Many highly regulated fields (for example medicine) have a far worse record in this respect than our own. In fact research points to the conclusion that regulation fails to live up to its promise to protect the public from abusive practitioners. As Mowbray (1995) argues, incidences of abuse do not decrease when there is greater regulation, and may even increase. In relation to psychotherapy, which is in some respects analogous to our own field, Mowbray (1995 pp.198–9) points out:

We have the very occupations who ought to know better, pursuing the myth of accreditation ... and seeking 'official recognition'.... By doing so the practitioner's status as expert would become endorsed by the state and his or her authority commensurately enhanced... clients can be lulled into a false sense of security and suspension of judgement by such a system. It encourages them to defer to the authority of the practitioner ... to leave their brain at the door—in a way that fosters dependency and a letting down of appropriate self-protective guards.

Carl Rogers (1980 p.364) wrote:

... there are as many *certified* charlatans and exploiters of people as there are un-certified. If you had a good friend badly in need of therapeutic help, and I gave you the name of a therapist who was a Diplomat in Clinical Psychology, with no other information, would you send your friend to him? Of course not. You would want to know what he was like as a person ... recognising that there are many with diplomas on their walls who are not fit to do therapy, lead a group, or help a marriage. Certification is *not* equivalent to competence.

You can't impose respectful and non-abusive relationships on people. It's perfectly possible to abuse and dominate a person while fulfilling all the requirements of a professional code of conduct. In fact, some psychotherapists have been concerned that this is exactly what is happening in their field, with therapists, not necessarily consciously, using professional status and the respectability it brings to reinforce their authority and power in the therapeutic relationship (House, 2003). So long as guidelines are followed, the therapist



is assumed to be 'ok', and can dominate the client with impunity in more subtle and covert ways which can never be legislated against or proven.

Looking at the phenomenon of professionalism more broadly, (Illich, 1977) describes the development of a 'serviced society' which ends up sustaining or worsening the very problems it claims to solve. Professionalised assistance may come to dominate every corner of peoples' lives to the point where they may feel insecure or incompetent to make basic decisions about their health, the education of themselves and their children, and their psychological state without the help of certified professionals. This trend represents a disempowerment of humanity, and helps to create the very problem of dependency and lack of responsibility which proponents of professionalisation argue justifies professionalisation! It's surprising that teachers of a Technique which is fundamentally concerned with taking responsibility for oneself should see no contradiction in participating in such cultural dynamics.

## **Professionalisation and Teacher Training**

The influence of professionalisation is likely to be felt particularly strongly on Alexander teacher training courses where the adoption of detailed state and professional requirements for trainees to be judged against is likely to necessitate a shift in the emphasis of training. Instead of trainee teachers being free to use the course to develop their understanding of the Alexander Technique and how to teach it according to their own values and judgement, the emphasis is likely to subtly shift towards it being a place for the profession to impose its standards, values and behavioural norms on trainees.

This represents a shift away from teaching relationships where the trainee is respected and allowed to flower in their own way rather than being subtly coerced through codified ways of working and the threat of professional exclusion. I suggest that such a respectful, open and non-coercive training environment is essential to allow the freedom and self-directed discovery and exploration on which profound and integrated learning (as opposed to mere imitation) depends, and which is behind *true* quality and high standards in training. Counter-intuitively, the attempt to impose universally agreed standards on training gives rise to mediocrity.

Furthermore, teaching relationships that are genuinely respectful demand the teacher be prepared to enter the relationship as a social equal, which implies not having a strong social or pedagogic agenda to enforce. Such a teacher must be prepared to make themselves vulnerable, to break down the social space that exists, and to acknowledge their incapacity and helplessness in the face of an ambiguous problem which cannot be solved in a meaningful and integrated way without the full and equal involvement of both teacher and student.

## Conclusion

The decision by the members of a field to pursue a ‘professional project’ involves a far-reaching reassessment of that occupation and its members’ relationship to each other, to their clients, and to society. The adoption by an Alexander Technique organisation of a fully professional ethos would represent a radical departure from F.M.’s early envisioning of the work as ‘Man’s Supreme inheritance’ to an impoverished view of the Technique as a service provided in a competitive marketplace to clients by professionals who are colluding in social dynamics that reflect the very problems being experienced by the client.

The implications of this shift should not be underestimated—not least because not all Alexander teachers have fully abandoned the radicalness of Alexander’s original position. This was extreme, grandiose and unrealistic, as well as racist in parts. Humanity as a whole is not, it seems, going to seize the Alexander Technique and use it to progress onto the next stage of its evolution in the near future. However, the full-scale adoption of the values of professionalism would be an over-compensation which negates the fact that, to many of its practitioners, the Alexander Technique is not simply a livelihood, but is a way of life and being—perhaps even a calling—and one which is not necessarily in accord with mainstream societal values.

There’s a tendency for proponents of professionalisation within a field to claim such a process is inevitable, or a ‘natural evolution’, or that it is a normal part of the maturing of a field. It is none of these things. It’s simply one possible direction out of several a field might take. Alexander teachers should know more than others that there is always *choice*. We don’t have to do a

certain way. Even if governments attempt to impose professionalisation, such attempts can be challenged and resisted.

Professionalisation tends to be a one-way street. The experience of other fields suggests that once started down the road of integration with the state apparatus, the tendency is always towards ever greater entanglement. The tempting carrots offered at the beginning have a nasty habit of turning into unpleasant sticks later on. It would be wise to reflect further before heading boldly towards a situation which will be, at best, extremely difficult to reverse later if the results are not as advertised.

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