

Teaching Back-to-Back

April 17, 2018, revised May 2024

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Now and again in the last few years I've found myself sitting back-to-back with my Alexander students. This can be a powerful resource in the right situation, so I thought I'd share some of the ways I use it, and how it can be helpful.

There are several ways this kind of work can be of benefit:

- It can provide rich feedback to students about habits they have around support and breathing.
- It's an effective way to help people experience what it is like to 'come back'.
- It can be a powerful but safe way to help someone regulate their arousal levels.
- It's an effective but gentle way to give insight into habitual responses people might have around making contact with others and to explore alternatives.
- It's a powerful way to work with the voice and with singing for people who are nervous or ashamed of vocalising.

Working back-to-back is quite an intimate way of being with someone, so it's generally a good idea for you and the student to have been working together for a little while, for there to be a degree of ease and trust between you, and to be sure the student does not have a strong habit of wanting to please the teacher so they can give an authentic 'yes' or 'no' as to whether they really want to work this way.

Feedback and Habits

To work like this you need to have a fairly fat and firm cushion—a large, well-filled beanbag cushion works well. You sit back-to-back on this, ideally

with crossed legs. To begin with, the idea is to come together into a place where you are making gentle contact with your backs so you both can breathe freely and are neither pushing rigidly against each other nor collapsing or pulling away. This will probably involve a bit of juggling of position, and in particular finding a comfortable distance between your two pelvises.

This process of exploration can in itself be an interesting and revealing game. It's quite easy to spend ten or fifteen minutes gently exploring together. It's potentially powerful because the student is getting a larger area of contact with the teacher than in normal hands-on work, so the resonance between the two nervous systems is more noticeable. In addition, as the teacher you are getting a very direct and sensitive contact with the student's back. It's surprising how much more you may notice about what they (and you) are up to. There's no need to rush any of this, and it can be surprising how rich it can be and how much there may be to be discovered.

Finding Support

This process can be particularly helpful for students who find it difficult to let go into the dynamic support of their postural system. Often this difficulty is rooted in a fundamental feeling of lack of safety, which for some may have roots in their very early life. When we are emotionally and physically held as a baby in a way that feels secure enough to allow us to trust and let go, it helps us to trust that *life itself* is safe to let go into. In time this fundamental sense of safety makes it easier for the developing child to let go into the support of their own postural system as they begin to explore upright life. If, on the other hand, our early experience of being held is compromised for some reason (perhaps because the parent is emotionally absent and withdrawing, or is themselves traumatised or over-aroused and unable to let go and trust) the person may later find it difficult to believe it is safe to let go into support of *any* kind. In addition, some people who did experience secure holding as a young child may have experienced difficult situations and experiences later which belied that early experience of safety, leaving them in a similar situation. But whatever its root cause, back-to-back work can be particularly helpful for people who have a deeply rooted difficulty with letting go into support.

It gives an adult-appropriate experience of supportive contact and co-regulation from another person which—though quite intimate—also has a distance which can make it feel relatively unthreatening, providing a sense of secure and safe contact and support without the person being engulfed as they would if being literally held. In this way it can act as a helpful halfway-house towards them learning to let go into the support of their own postural system. For some, a little bit of this kind of work can make a big difference very quickly

Habits of Connection and Disconnection

Another way of using back-to-back work is to explore the habits people might have developed around making contact with others. Are they tending to push against us and ‘lean’ on us? Do they shrink away from contact? Do they become rigid and unyielding?

One good thing about this approach is we don’t have to psychoanalyse people or try and convince them of anything because the habits are expressing so obviously at a physical level. They can be clearly seen and talked about in a way which doesn't involve assumptions about meaning or causes on the part of the teacher. This makes it possible to straightforwardly discuss what may be going on for the student in relation to these habitual ways of responding. People are often very willing to explore such questions if we simply point out (while holding preconceptions in abeyance) what is happening and wonder what attitudes and feelings might lie behind it. If these become conscious it's often much easier to say ‘no’ to the habit and experience a different way of reacting because there is now a richer, more multi-faceted appreciation of what they are up to and why.

Working with the Voice

I’ve also found back-to-back work to be useful when working with the voice, particularly when working with people who find singing difficult or shaming. I tend to encourage most of my students to explore singing a bit (not everyone takes me up on the offer!) because it’s such a direct form of self-expression which makes the defensive habits we have around showing our true selves quite apparent. Many people have been shamed around using their voice to express and be heard, and find it difficult to make sounds that are an

authentic expression of themselves. Instead they will tend to tighten, shorten, close down and cut off. Working back-to-back has the advantage that there's a sense of someone being there, and of a supportive and holding presence, but no one is *looking* at them. Some people find this very liberating. If a person is so shy of singing that they literally can't make a sound when invited to do so (not at all uncommon) we can suggest starting with humming on a single note and—to make it easier still—we can hum along with them so they are less exposed and their expression is mirrored and validated. In the process we can notice with them how they may lose connection with us and with themselves—perhaps by interfering with their breathing, stiffening, pulling down or away from us, or losing their connection with the ground. It can be exhilarating how soon this way of working can end up with someone who was initially almost too shy to hum singing along quite happily in an improvised duet!

Additional Pointers

It's a privilege to be permitted to connect with someone back-to-back, and it may take courage and vulnerability on the part of the student, which needs to be taken into account at all times. It's particularly important to take a bit of care about how you go about breaking the contact with them when you finish. People can go quite deeply into themselves in this work, particularly where voice work is involved, and we need to appreciate a connection has been made and negotiate how, and how quickly, we disengage.

Finally, to reiterate, because sitting back-to-back is a relatively intimate way to be with someone it's essential there's an existing level of ease and trust with the student, and you're sure they are able to give a meaningful 'yes' to the activity. When it goes well this work is often a very nice and quite touching thing to do for both parties, and it's a good idea to be clear about our own needs and wishes around this sort of contact, and to make sure that if you suggest it you are doing so for the student and not for yourself. If you have doubts about it, checking out your motivations with an appropriate neutral third party, is a good idea.

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