



The Alexander Technique, Mindfulness, and Wellness for Performing Arts Students

By Eric S. Kildow

Introduction

Theatre faculty understand intuitively that their students are struggling. They face an onslaught of new stimuli within the limits of a full schedule and not enough time. In their hurry, students seem disconnected from the ground beneath them. Ideally, an effective way to help them could be integrated into the performing arts curriculum. The faculty are a major potential resource for students in dealing with this stress, as Robert Barton, of the University of Oregon, pointed out when he claimed that such issues could not “be dismissed with a convenient disclaimer which separates art from healing.”¹ Just as Barton points out, students’ artistic explorations cannot be divorced from their lives.

As director of the theatre program at Kent State University, Trumbull, and an Alexander Technique practitioner, I began integrating Alexander’s work on self-use into the introductory acting curriculum. In doing so, I noticed a marked difference in my students not only in the studio, but in traditional classroom settings as well. Given that our introductory acting class

¹ Robert Barton, “Therapy and Actor Training,” *Theatre Topics* 4, no. 2 (1994): 105.

focuses primarily on the actor's warmup, Alexander Technique integrated smoothly. This success, along with Alexander's compatibility with contemporary acting pedagogy, led me to investigate the possible causes of my students' positive reactions. The key question was whether or not the Alexander Technique, or some other factor, could be credited with my students' improved states. Though anecdotal in nature, the results I obtained led me to further investigate the nature of the stress faced by the student actor and how the Alexander Technique might be used in addressing this problem.

This paper builds on my findings as an educator coupled with research and practical experience. I first look to address the question of stress in student actors, building from a foundation of stressors faced by the general student population and drawing a thumbnail sketch of the stressful life of a student actor in the university setting. I then turn to an examination of mindfulness as a proven remedy for stress and explore potential shortcomings of major contemporary mindfulness practices. To overcome these shortcomings, I offer as an option the Alexander Technique, which is best understood as a form of embodied mindfulness applied to action.

Stresses Faced by College Students

Scholars have known for the past twenty years that stress in the college population is a problem. Linda Sax, in her 1997 study published in the *Journal of American College Health*, found that stress levels rose consistently while emotional health declined in the college population for at least ten years.² Sax's study, which spanned nearly thirty years, questioned

² Linda J. Sax, "Health Trends among College Freshmen," *Journal of American College Health* 45, no. 6 (1997): 258.

incoming freshmen about a selection of issues ranging from physical and emotional health to drug, alcohol, and sexual habits. The results indicated that, over the course of the study, declines in student wellness and increases in stress were both consistent and steady. Further, Sax points out that, though her study only makes inquiries of incoming freshmen, the results of the ensuing four years were not particularly encouraging either.³ A 1982 study at the University of Pittsburgh found that students expressed an interest in stress management programming more than any other type of wellness.⁴ The Pittsburgh study comprises a cluster of examinations of college student stress, and possible remedies, that took place in the 1980s.⁵ The lack of more recent studies of the specifics of student stress management programming strongly speaks to the needs for this work. These findings give a quantitative foundation to something which educators have suspected for a long time: that stress and coping are problems for the college student community. These stressors can have significant impact on both students' satisfaction with their collegiate experience as well as their potential academic performance. Jungki Lee and Sunghyun Jang, writing in *Services Marketing Quarterly* in 2015, found that "the statistical analysis testing the relationship between overall stress and student satisfaction demonstrated a significantly high negative representation between them."⁶

Students under stress aren't going to really find satisfaction with their college experience. The

³ Sax, "Health Trends," 258.

⁴ Robert G. La Civita, "Stress-Management Programming and the College Student: A Report," *Journal of American College Health* 30, no. 5 (1982): 239.

⁵ See also:

Sheila A. Ramsey, Jerrold S. Greenberg, and Janet Fraser Hale, "Evaluation of a Self-Instructional Program in Stress Management for College Students." *Health Education* 20, no. 1 (1989): 8-13.

James Archer Jr. "Stress Management: Evaluating a Preventive Approach for College Students." *Journal of American College Health* 34, no. 4 (1986): 157-60.

⁶ Jungki Lee and Sunghyun Jang, "An Exploration of Stress and Satisfaction in College Students," *Services Marketing Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (2015): 256.

academic fallout of this result is echoed by a study in *Computers in Human Behavior*, which explored smartphone addiction, stress, and academic achievement. Though they did not find correlation between smartphones and academic achievement, they did find that “students experiencing low levels of satisfaction with life were less likely to achieve satisfactory cumulative GPAs and were more likely to shift to higher levels of perceived stress.”⁷ Today’s college students are facing an elevated level of stress, which is negatively impacting both their satisfaction with the collegiate experience and their academic performance. Though they provide useful baseline knowledge examining the difficulties faced by today’s collegiate theatre students, these studies do not address, or even examine, discipline-specific stressors found in the theatre and performing arts.

Consensus exists among acting teachers that unique challenges face their students, but the precise scope and nature of those challenges is less clear. As an example, the emotional and psychological impact of acting, whether it be emotional distress or assaults on sense of self, are only somewhat understood. Indeed, Judith Ohikuare, writing for *The Atlantic*, noted:

The idea that there are psychological consequences to good acting has been espoused so often that it’s easy to assume the science is there to back it up. As a result, the sudden and often surprising deaths of talented actors sometimes inspire fearful, knowing whispers about the dangers of delving “too deep” into harrowing roles.⁸

However, Ohikuare quickly goes on to point out that there has been little engagement between scientists, cognitive scientists, and the study of acting. There is a dearth of studies that explore this issue, and this deficiency becomes especially notable in the case of student actors. Further,

⁷ Maya Samaha and Nazir S. Hawi, “Relationships among smartphone addiction, stress, academic performance, and satisfaction with life,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 57 (2016): 324.

⁸ Judith Ohikuare, “How Actors Create Emotions: A Problematic Psychology,” *The Atlantic*, March 10, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/03/how-actors-create-emotions-a-problematic-psychology/284291/>.

Ohikuare's article does not address student actors but instead actors working in the professional environment. The little material available on student actors primarily examines these psychological stresses, but the results of these examinations is vague at best and contradictory at worst.

Two quantitative studies exist that examine student actors specifically, and they come to opposing conclusions. In examining the impact of character traits on a student actor's sense of self—sometimes called “character invasion”—Charles Neuringer and Ronald A. Willis of the University of Kansas at Lawrence concluded that character invasion was a dubious concept, despite theatrical folklore, and that if it really did exist it was a “weak force in terms of affecting actors' self-concepts.”⁹ In essence, Neuringer and Willis found that character traits do not tend to “rub off” and that student actors do not become more like their characters. However, Mo Therese Hannah, George Domino, Richard Hanson, and William Hannah of Siena College and the University of Arizona came to the conclusion that “the character one is developing probably does have an influence on personality dimensions.”¹⁰ Thus we have two studies with diametrically opposite conclusions regarding one of the potentially important stressors facing student actors. Differences between their conclusions might be accidents of sample size, assessment instrument, or departmental culture. Neuringer and Willis, notably, had the actors fill out a semantic differential form with seven positive-to-negative ratings at four points during the rehearsal process.¹¹ Comparably, Hannah et al. used an adjective checklist approach at four

⁹ Charles Neuringer and Ronald A. Willis, “The Cognitive Psychodynamics of Acting: Character Invasion and Director Influence,” *Empirical Studies of the Arts* 13, no. 1 (1995): 51.

¹⁰ Mo Therese Hannah et al., “Acting and Personality Change: The Measurement of Change in Self-Perceived Personality Characteristics during the Actor's Character Development Process,” *Journal of Research in Personality* 28, no. 3 (1994): 284.

¹¹ Neuringer and Willis, “Cognitive Psychodynamics,” 48-49.

points during the rehearsal process; this instrument yields thirty-seven scales.¹² Thus, the conflict might be reducible based upon the variation in assessment instruments used. A third study on the concept of character invasion, this time using qualitative methodology, was published in 1999 and reached the conclusion that “the blurring of boundaries between actor and character may be a significant condition for impact.”¹³ In this latter study by Suzanne Burgoyne, Karen Poulaine, and Ashley Rearden, the important question was how strongly can character invasion, referred to as “boundary blurring” in this case, impact the student actor? The findings, using a qualitative measure called grounded dimensional analysis, were largely positive. This approach consisted of conducting in-depth interviews and then indexing keywords from those same interviews to build a “grounded theory” regarding outcomes.¹⁴ This in-depth approach, though qualitative in nature, produces results similar to those of Hannah et al. Respondents find that unclear boundaries between self and character are artistically effective, but they also carry consequences for the students’ personal lives.¹⁵ Thus, though results are not completely conclusive, theatre educators should at least pay attention to the possibility of spillover from the rehearsal process impacting the student’s life in unforeseen, and potentially stressful, ways. This stimulus, unique to the student actor community—one does not generally ask an accounting student to get inside the emotions of their spreadsheet—appears to have evidence supporting both existence and impact. However, this is but one particularly flamboyant stressor facing the student actor.

¹² Hannah et al., “Acting and Personality Change,” 280.

¹³ Suzanne Burgoyne, Karen Poulaine, and Ashley Rearden, “The Impact of Acting on Student Actors: Boundary Blurring, Growth, and Emotional Distress,” *Theatre Topics* 9, no. 2 (1999): 157.

¹⁴ Burgoyne, Poulaine, and Rearden, “Impact of Acting,” 158.

¹⁵ Burgoyne, Poulaine, and Rearden, 160.

Character invasion or boundary blurring aside, there exists no study of stresses facing the student actor population. Scholars must rely on examining the intersections between the general college population, non-student actors, and students from other performing arts disciplines to develop a picture of acting student stress. Although there is no examination of theatre students in comparison to other student populations, E. M. van Fenema and C. C. J. van Geel of Leiden University have found that first-year musical conservatory students compare strongly with medical students in terms of their risk for stress-related psychological disorders, both of them experiencing heightened risk in comparison with the general student population.¹⁶ Given certain similar conditions in the music and theatre industries, such as low employment and applied studio education models, basic similarities of experience for music and theatre conservatory students is a reasonable assumption. Both students face long practice with similarly sparse potential employment outcomes. Indeed, a psychological study by Susan E. Marchant-Haycox and Glenn D. Wilson found that although actors differed strongly from musicians in certain personality traits, in some cases (such as a measure of introversion/extroversion) yielding a result which lies on the opposite end of the spectrum from the non-artist control group, they are prey to the same levels of stress due to unique demands and a precarious professional existence.¹⁷ It is thus a reasonable assumption that student actors will face similarly elevated levels of stress compared to their counterparts in other disciplines alongside unique stressors which have already been explored.

¹⁶ E. M. van Fenema and C. C. J. van Geel, "Mental Problems Among First-Year Conservatory Students Compared with Medical Students," *Medical Problems of Performing Artists* 29, no. 2 (2014): 113.

¹⁷ Susan E. Marchant-Haycox and Glenn D. Wilson, "Personality and stress in performing artists," *Personality and Individual Differences* 13, no. 10 (1992): 1066-67.

However, faculty perceptions of student stress may not correlate with actual stressors or even student perceptions of the same. Ranjita Misra, writing for *College Student Journal*, conducted a comparative study and found that “faculty members perceived students to experience higher levels of stress and display more reactions to stressors than the students’ self-perceptions.”¹⁸ It might be that what faculty seem to intuitively know about their students may be skewed by seeing them primarily in more stressful environments, such as office hours or classes. Further, this might lead to miscommunication regarding student stress, inhibiting faculty ability to respond when needed. Due to the time commitments of studio classes and rehearsal schedules, theatre faculty often spend a significant amount of time with their students. This additional time may limit downtime for student actors, but it may also allow the faculty a clearer glimpse into the student’s condition than are afforded colleagues in other disciplines.

Exploring the results of the studies discussed above allows educators to construct a rough outline of the problems faced by student actors in spite of the dearth of general studies on the subject. The college environment, with its new experiences, is already stressful. Studies further indicate that student artists face heightened levels of stress, akin to those experienced in medical schools. However, aside from simply experiencing higher levels of disquiet, student actors are subjected to unique emotional stressors that may even impinge upon their sense of themselves. An image of students as overwhelmed and helpless against a sea of troubles paints itself all too easily. However, in being aware of the nature of the problem, educators can be

¹⁸ Ranjita Misra et al., “Academic stress of college students: Comparison of student and faculty perceptions,” *College Student Journal* 34, no. 2 (2000): 236.

prepared to assist students. One recent approach to tackling student stress has been an embrace of mindfulness practices, which have shown efficacy in stress reduction.

Mindfulness Approaches to Stress

Mindfulness, drawing originally from Buddhist contemplative practices, is a growing field of study in the West, and many steps have been made to integrate it into various therapeutic and clinical environments. These practices posit the idea that “suffering is a consequence of the automatic tendency to cling to phenomena,” while mindfulness seeks to return the practitioner’s mind into the present.¹⁹ As opposed to allowing phenomena to linger in awareness, prompting rumination, a mindful practice approaches a stimulus in something of a detached manner: “Thoughts and feelings are not ignored, suppressed, analyzed or judged for content. Rather these experiences noted as they occur and observed non-judgmentally, moment by moment, as the events enter into the field of awareness.”²⁰ This contemplative approach is thought to ground the practitioner in the reality of their physical and mental environment, an approach which engenders acceptance and has been shown to reduce stress.

The efficacy of mindfulness practice has strong support in the medical community, particularly in the field of psychology. Numerous studies explored the efficacy of various mindfulness practices, finding varying degrees of success. However, a meta-analysis of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) has found some encouraging results in aggregating several independent studies:

¹⁹ Victoria Follette, Kathleen M. Palm, and Adria N. Pearson, “Mindfulness and Trauma: Implications for Treatment,” *Journal of Rational-Emotive & Cognitive-Behavior Therapy* 24, no. 1 (2006): 47.

²⁰ Follette, Palm, and Pearson, “Mindfulness,” 47.

The consistent and relatively strong level of effect sizes across very different types of sample indicates that mindfulness training might enhance general features of coping with distress and disability in everyday life, as well as under more extraordinary conditions of serious disorder or stress.²¹

In analyzing the results of numerous studies, chosen for their use of control groups, large sample size, and methodology, Grossman et al. found a consistent efficacy in MBSR, particularly in the realm of managing continual or low-scale stress. This level of consistency is encouraging to proponents of MBSR specifically and other mindfulness approaches more generally, as the reduction of stress in the general population suggests that mindfulness can also be a potent tool for the student population as well.

There are few studies applying mindfulness to students, and none specifically examining MBSR, which is primarily used in a clinical—as opposed to educational—setting. However, Kiyomi Yamada and Tara L. Victor of California State University, Dominguez Hills, examined the impact of mindful awareness practices (MAPs) when introduced to a student group as a part of a college introductory course. They sought to find out if some form of mindfulness practice could be introduced into the often-busy college schedule and what efficacy it might have. Yamada and Victor found that mindfulness practice was “associated with the cultivation of mindfulness traits, as well as lower levels of rumination and state anxiety.”²² This reduction in perceived stress is an encouraging result; however, the results of this study did not obtain empirical evidence that MAPs improved student learning outcomes, which would be an ideal result of any curricular addition. This limitation may have something to do with the specific

²¹ Paul Grossman et al., “Mindfulness-based stress reduction and health benefits: A meta-analysis,” *Journal of Psychosomatic Research* 57, no. 1 (2004): 39.

²² Kiyomi Yamada and Tara L. Victor, “The Impact of Mindful Awareness Practices on College Student Health, Well-being, and Capacity for Learning: a pilot study,” *Psychology Learning and Teaching* 11, no. 2 (2012): 143.

mindfulness approach chosen for the study, and it suggests that a more holistic approach may yield even more satisfactory results.

Holistic interventions, meaning those which address both the body and mind, have demonstrated a significant improvement in the condition of students coping with stress. In a 2002 study at Harvard Medical School, as part of the Benson-Henry Institute for Mind/Body Medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital, researchers found significant reductions in stress and state anxiety coupled with increases in health-promoting behaviors.²³ In the Harvard study, students were trained in the Relaxation Response (RR) as a psychical technique while also being trained in Cognitive Behavioral Intervention (CBI), a mental approach. This is significant in that, by comparison, MSRB and MAPs were both purely mental approaches to stress reduction that do not really engage bodily reactions. The results of the intervention were such that, though the participants at the beginning of the program reported significantly elevated stress levels above that of the general college population, their stress levels fell below those of the control group and the general population to the point that symptom severity fell to a nonclinical (no need for treatment) range for adults.²⁴ These findings are significant, but they also come with a fairly substantial investment; this program consisted of no fewer than six weeks of training sessions. However, it is noteworthy that the RR/CBI approach, taking into account both physical and mental elements of coping with stress, achieved significant and sustained results in improving the conditions of students.

²³ Gloria R. Deckro et al., "The Evaluation of a Mind/Body Intervention to Reduce Psychological Distress and Perceived Stress in College Students," *Journal of American College Health* 50, no. 6 (2002): 286.

²⁴ Deckro et al., "Evaluation," 286.

One of the difficulties with contemporary mindfulness practices is that, in their proliferation from classical, particularly Buddhist, models, many have developed idiosyncratic approaches or definitions that do not mesh with the original concepts attached to mindfulness. Lobsang Rappagay and Alexander Bystrisky of University of California, Los Angeles, have outlined strong objections against many contemporary mindfulness practices because “modern versions of mindfulness do not focus on changing maladaptive thoughts, feelings, and behavior.”²⁵ Essentially, the focus of contemporary mindfulness on a nonjudgmental awareness has left it poorly adapted to assist in the improvement of experienced difficulties. It is worth noting that, of the three mindfulness programs discussed (MAPs, MBSR, and RR/CSI), the most successful sought to relax the participant while challenging—instead of accepting—cognitive distortions. Further, the most successful of the programs engages both the mind and body in the coping process. One such approach, which is already integrated into several actor training and theatre education programs throughout the United States, provides a holistic, yet secular, method of approaching and alleviating stressful situations. This technique, the Alexander Technique, does so by emphasizing mindfulness in action and the mind/body connection.

The Alexander Technique as Embodied Mindfulness

The Alexander Technique is best understood as embodied mindfulness in action, and it is already an integral part of numerous actor training programs. In an Alexander Technique lesson, the teacher assists the pupil—using manual manipulation and/or verbal instruction—in

²⁵ Lobsang Rappagay and Alexander Bystrisky, “Classical Mindfulness: An Introduction to Its Theory and Practice for Clinical Application,” *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1172 (2009): 149.

improving their physical use and efficiency in performance. The teacher's assistance is required; according to F. M. Alexander, the technique's originator, "because we are able to do what we 'will to do' in acts that are habitual and involve familiar sensory experiences, we should be equally successful in doing what we 'will to do' in acts which are contrary to our habit and therefore involve sensory experiences that are unfamiliar."²⁶ The teacher helps the student find the unfamiliar sensory experience that goes with improved use. Through lessons and practice, freeing the student from their harmful habits remains the goal. Eventually, the student will be able to sustain their own improved use. F. M. Alexander writes, "For once real conscious control is obtained, a 'habit' need never be fixed; it is not truly a habit at all, but an order or series of orders given to the subordinate controls of the body, which orders will be carried out until countermanded."²⁷ In the Alexander Technique's work against harmful habits of body and mind, the goal of the teacher is not to simply "fix" the difficulties but instead to prepare the student to get themselves out of difficulty, should it arise. Notably, practitioners of the Alexander Technique are not "therapists" and do not have "clients." It is not a therapeutic technique, whatever benefit may be derived, but an educational technique. Practitioners are "teachers" who have "students." The goal here is a psycho-physical approach that gives the student control over their responses, which can then be used in the performance process.

F. M. Alexander developed his technique to deal with a specific problem. As a Shakespearean actor, he would consistently lose his voice each time he recited. His technique, best understood as a form of embodied mindfulness in action, allowed him to overcome

²⁶ F. M. Alexander, *The Use of the Self* (Long Beach, CA: Centerline Press, 1989), 9.

²⁷ F. M. Alexander, *Man's Supreme Inheritance* (Long Beach, CA: Centerline Press, 1988), 22.

harmful habits of mind and body to regain his voice. In seeking to recite, he found that his “desire to recite, like any other stimulus to activity, would inevitably cause this habitual wrong use to come into play and dominate any attempt [he] might be making to employ better use of [himself] in reciting.”²⁸ The problem was not so much reciting in and of itself—his voice was not sick—but the way he “used” himself in reciting. Just as mindfulness encourages the practitioner to be aware of the present moment, so too does the Alexander Technique. However, unlike many mindfulness practices, the Alexander Technique is to be employed in the performance of actions. Addressing this difference, John Austin of the American Center for the Alexander Technique points out that “you will soon find that it’s difficult to notice your mind wandering and come back to the awareness of your breath when you’re doing nothing, let alone when there is a task at hand.”²⁹ A focus on mindfulness in action, as opposed to resting (or some other idealized circumstance), theoretically offers far more benefit to the student actor. Acting pedagogy is, generally speaking, rooted in the pursuit of actions, objectives, or goals as opposed to a simple state of being. Alexander, in his explorations, steadily found that he must focus on the “means whereby” if he is to accomplish his goal, instead of simply doing it.³⁰ The focus, instead of on “being correct,” was upon the method of accomplishing the goal. This approach is a natural complement to contemporary acting practice. Stanislavski tells us, after all, that “on the stage it is necessary to act, either outwardly or inwardly.”³¹ Acting is about doing something. If a mindfulness technique is to be used successfully in the acting process, it

²⁸ Alexander, *The Use of the Self*, 10.

²⁹ John Austin, “Mindfulness and the Alexander Technique,” *American Center for the Alexander Technique* (blog), accessed December 5, 2016, <https://www.acatnyc.org/blog-posts/2015/04/10/mindfulness-and-the-alexander-technique>.

³⁰ Alexander, *The Use of the Self*, 15.

³¹ Konstantin Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 37.

will need to be goal-oriented and embrace the entirety of the acting student in a holistic way. The Alexander Technique, much like classical mindfulness, is both goal-oriented and holistic in its consideration of mind and body.

In considering the entirety of the organism, the Alexander Technique takes mind and body unity as one of its first principles. Alexander himself writes:

I must admit that when I began my investigation, I . . . conceived of the 'body' and 'mind' as separate parts of the same organism, and consequently believed that human ills, difficulties and shortcomings could be classified as either 'mental' or 'physical' and dealt with on specifically 'mental' or specifically 'physical' lines. Many practical experiences, however, led me to abandon this point of view . . .³²

Alexander's shift in understanding was significant in that it meant elements of the individual could not be treated discretely from one another, but instead the entirety of the individual's use must be considered.³³ Purely cognitive mindfulness misses the perceptual element. Rappagay and Bystrisky, in a discussion on classical mindfulness practices in *Longevity, Regeneration, and Optimal Health*, point to the dualistic nature of classical mindfulness, emphasizing the analogy of the two oxen who pull the cart together.³⁴ Both physical and mental, the combination of which Alexander simply referred to as "psycho-physical," must be addressed equally if any technique in stress reduction is to have maximum efficacy. Importantly, though practitioners have intuitively known about the mind/body connection, it has not been until recently that science has managed to clearly chart at least some of this relationship, providing support for the embrace of a holistic mindfulness approach.

³² Alexander, *The Use of the Self*, 1.

³³ "Use" is a term in Alexander Technique for the general functioning of the organism.

³⁴ Rappagay and Bystrisky, "Classical Mindfulness," 153.

The mind/body connection, generally taken on faith by many in somatic disciplines, recently found new support in the realm of experimental neuroscience. By tracking the backward progress of rabies in the nervous system of monkeys, scientists at the University of Pittsburgh found previously undiscovered linkages between the parts of the brain responsible for movement and the adrenal medulla, which controls stress responses in primates. Publishing their findings in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, Richard Dum, David Levinthal, and Peter Strick write that their “observations suggest that there is a link between descending control of ‘core muscles’ and the regulation of sympathetic output. This link may provide a neural substrate for the control of stress through ‘core’ exercises.”³⁵ What Dum, Levinthal, and Strick have found is a neurological linkage between the part of the brain that controls the motion of our core muscles and the part of the brain that is responsible for managing our stress reactions, potentially explaining the efficacy of practices such as yoga or Pilates in managing stress reactions. Though the Alexander Technique is not in itself a “core exercise,” it emphasizes effective use of those muscles in aligning the individual against gravity. A primary goal of this “improved use” is a feeling of ease and lightness in one’s movements. Frank Pierce Jones of Tufts University describes how the Alexander practitioner works:

Applying light pressure with the hands, the demonstrator changes the balance of the subject’s head in such a way that the muscles at the nape of the neck lengthen Properly carried out, the procedure will establish a new dynamic balance between the weight of the head and the tonus of the muscles so that within a limited range the head behaves like an inertial system which can move . . . without any feeling of weight.³⁶

³⁵ Richard P. Dum, David J. Levinthal, and Peter L. Strick, “Motor, cognitive, and affective areas of the cerebral cortex influence the adrenal medulla,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 113, no. 35 (2016): 9925.

³⁶ Frank Pierce Jones, *Body Awareness in Action* (New York: Schocken Books, 1979), 5.

The balance of this inertial system means that the motor cortex must be engaged in order to keep the body upright in the gravitational field. The finding of optimal balance allows this part of the brain to work differently, allowing movement and adjustment as opposed to simply trying to hold the body upright. Further, the uncovering of these neural pathways provides an additional anatomical basis for the treatment of a psycho-physical whole in addressing stress through sensory stimuli.

Randy Bruno of Columbia University, commenting on Dum, Levinthal, and Strick's findings for *The Atlantic*, also pointed to strong linkages between the adrenal medulla and the sensory cortex. Bruno suggests a decentralized process as opposed to a top-down, brain-to-body connection. As a specialist in sensory neuroscience, he finds in the results a possible explanation as to why we find certain sensations relaxing.³⁷ The Alexander Technique has a strong focus on sensory lightness and ease of "working without working," and such pleasant feedback to the sensory neurocortex may further complement motor and cognitive stimuli in stress reduction for our students. As John Austin asserted in his writings on mindfulness and the Alexander Technique, "proper use of the self which results in reliable sensory feedback is an essential first step to a successful mindfulness practice."³⁸ In order to attend to incoming stimuli and concentrate attention effectively, one's sensory appreciation must be a reliable guide to the reality of one's situation. Alexander himself felt that one of the primary purposes of the teacher's guidance was to instill new sensory appreciation in the student. So important was this sensory appreciation that Alexander insisted that the student rely solely on the

³⁷ James Hamblin, "Why One Neuroscientist Started Blasting His Core," *The Atlantic*, August 24, 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2016/08/cortical-adrenal-orchestra/496679/>.

³⁸ Austin, "Mindfulness."

teacher's guidance until improved appreciation was found "infallibly."³⁹ This was because an attempt to be guided by sensory awareness based on faulty sensory appreciation was bound to feel incorrect. Alexander pointed out that "the sensory experience associated with the new use would be so unfamiliar and therefore 'feel' so unnatural" that students trying to "feel" their way to improved use would face a hopeless task.⁴⁰ However, with the education provided by the Alexander Technique, students can eventually free themselves of their harmful habits.

Overcoming habits is a continual process throughout life and art. The Alexander Technique, as an educational approach, is well-suited to equipping students to cope over the long term. Alexander notes that "once real conscious control is obtained, a 'habit' need never be fixed; it is truly not a habit at all, but an order or series of orders given to the subordinate controls of the body, which orders will be carried out until countermanded."⁴¹ A student equipped with the Alexander Technique is capable of addressing their needs through continued application of the work. It is a new way of working as opposed to a quick fix for what ails and therefore prepares the student for embodied mindfulness in action.

Conclusion

Student stress is, by all indications, climbing. These heightened levels of stress are impacting student satisfaction and performance. In addition, it is reasonable to believe that student actors face unique emotional stressors such as character invasion or boundary blurring due to the nature of their work and study. Assisting them in coping with this disquiet, their

³⁹ Alexander, *Man's Supreme Inheritance*, 64.

⁴⁰ Alexander, *The Use of the Self*, 18.

⁴¹ Alexander, *The Use of the Self*, 22.

theatre instructors are often on the front lines and can help guide them to more constructive behaviors. Several mindfulness techniques, such as MAPs and MBSR, have shown promise in reducing stress in clinical settings, but they have not been able to address the student holistically. The Alexander Technique, with its focus on action, the means whereby, and the psychophysical whole, addresses these shortcomings and can be considered a form of embodied mindfulness in action, useful in assisting students with overcoming their harmful habits of mind and body. Given the fact that the Alexander Technique is often taught in actor training programs already, it can be further integrated without substantial difficulty.

In theory, and based on my own observations of my students, the work of F. M. Alexander is invaluable in the management of stress in our student actors. The ability to focus on the action in the moment is valuable to their personal and artistic growth. However, further study is needed to fully explore the possibilities presented by the Alexander Technique. Given that there has been no conclusive study of stress among student actors, nor any study of the Alexander Technique's efficacy outside of pain management, there is substantial room for continued examination of this issue. Though I have found the Technique useful and noticed student improvement, larger study must be done to provide more substantial understanding of the potential benefits of including it in the performance curriculum. The goal is, after all, to help those students to reconnect with themselves and the earth around them.

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