



What Not To Do | A Unique Educational Method

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Imagine this familiar scene: a teacher is telling you what to do while you listen intently. When it is time, you try your hardest *to do* the activity she described perfectly. Even though the teacher is kind, your fear of getting it wrong causes you to fumble and make mistakes. This style of teaching, that is, teaching what *to do* is very common. As a teacher, I know that

there are times when processes and options of ways to move forward need to be shared, of course! But, being so focused on what *to do* causes many to forget that learning what *not to do* is equally important. Fortunately, the Alexander Technique, which can be applied to the teaching of specific activities as well as daily living, focuses on this unique aspect of education and the ways it impacts learning and therefore, habit formation.

First, it is important to know that as humans, we learn and form habits and patterns through repeated action. When something works for us, it is likely that we will repeat it. When repeated over and over, the thing that worked will become an automatic habit (whether or not it continues to be helpful through various stages of life). Once something becomes automatic it can be very hard to make lasting changes to it and we find ourselves easily stuck in patterns that have outlived their usefulness, or perhaps were only mildly useful to begin with.

For example, as a child at school I was very anxious and did not like to be noticed. I thought that if no one called on or saw me, I could not do anything wrong (which was what I was afraid of). I worried so much that I actually shrunk in fear. You might imagine what that looked like, pulling my shoulders forward and down, rounding my spine back, and holding my breath. These are common patterns of stress that we have all witnessed.* Because these patterns made me feel safe and inconspicuous at the time, they became my go-to, automatic way of being not just in school situations, but throughout most activities of my life.

**These patterns of stress are part of the “fight or flight” response, also known as the “startle pattern.” When in a dangerous situation most mammals will display similar muscular patterns to help physically protect themselves from danger. After the threat passes, mammals in the wild easily release back into regular muscular patterns of ease. Humans who are repeatedly*

exposed to stressors (whether internal or external) can become fixed in these stress patterns and unable to return to ease when the perceived danger passes. Staying fixed in a startle pattern can cause problems such as excess pressure on organs and joints, muscle tiredness and pain, postural distortions, and decreased breathing capacity.

When I felt anxious or wished to go unnoticed, I unconsciously contracted my muscles (in response to what I perceived as danger) and pulled myself into a dangerously small state. Since my emotional patterns were habitual and happened often, the pattern of emotion and contraction was not in my conscious awareness. I had no idea what I was doing or how it related to my emotional state. I knew that I “felt anxious” but I had no idea what had gotten me there.

Similarly, an outside eye would have been able to spot my muscular pattern as “very bad posture” but it is unlikely that they would have known that my emotional and thought patterns were the triggers to my harmful visible patterns. If they had tried to help, they would have told me what *to do* (fix my “posture”) rather than what *not to do* (continue being controlled by unconscious habits that were causing issues).

I carried this pattern with me in my school work, flute playing and extracurriculars, eventually even into my yoga practice. Everything I tried to learn was impacted by my habits (the one discussed as well as many others, both harmful and helpful). Then, when I became stressed by trying *to do the right thing* in lessons, I slipped even further into my activated harmful pattern of unease. This brought with it the pain and strain of misusing my self (my emotions, muscles, and thoughts) and reinforced my stressed emotions, especially during repeated practice sessions (which happened often). The more I wanted to be *right and good*, the harder I tried, the more stressed I became. The more stressed I became, the *worse* I did at whatever I was trying to learn.

Though not aware of the process taking place, I was undoubtedly aware of the end result of my “poor posture,” and that I would be better off if I could correct it. I tried many times to “fix my posture” by “standing straight,” “relaxing,” or “sitting up.” Further, with a bit more awareness, I tried to remedy my anxiety by “feeling relaxed,” “calming down,” or “being confident.” Invariably, these inflexible ideas of how *to do posture right*, or *how to feel the right way* never stuck or helped my situation. In fact, the effort of trying to force myself to contend with ingrained opposing habits caused more strain, including a decrease in self esteem each time I believed I had failed.

What finally helped? Instead of focusing on what to do (“sit up,” “calm down”), I started focusing on what *not to do*. I began studying with an Alexander Technique teacher who helped me understand for the first time that by allowing myself to fall into old habits of overactive stress, I was *interfering* with my ability to function in a healthy way. I was *doing* the problem to myself without even noticing it in action. So, with the help of a teacher, I took a step back and began to notice what was happening in real time. Instead of trying *to do* things to fix myself, I finally learned that I had to stop doing the harmful things I was already doing, that were causing my problems.

Because my harmful muscular habits were triggered by my stressed emotional and thought patterns, I began to learn to identify when I started to slip into the unhelpful habits and see if I could stop myself from continuing with them. At the beginning, this task felt insurmountable, yet endlessly fascinating. Stopping a habitual reaction to a situation (ex: feeling overly insecure in a lesson) before there is time to behave in the automatic way, takes time and practice but has a unique set of rewards and outcomes that are not common in our educational system.

I learned that when I interrupt my habitual patterns, I stop myself from reacting automatically to them (ex: making myself small and fearful). When I manage to stop a habitual behavior, I experience something new and unique, a chance for something different. I realized that these new experiences could feel strange and possibly relieving, that they might even feel good or useful! Now, imagine how fascinating it would be if I found that this new reaction to a situation worked better than the old one! What if, instead of becoming immobilized by fear and fumbling through a lesson, I was able to focus on the task at hand and practice with ease and confidence? This ability to learn without fear is the piece of education we have been missing.

While first learning the Alexander Technique, a student will inevitably realize that the old habit is stronger than the new experience. They may be disappointed to realize they easily slip back into their old ways. Alas, this is part of the process! With the new knowledge that they can choose to interrupt and stop harmful patterns, they can repeatedly provide the opportunity to learn and experience something new. Over time, they create the opportunity to bring about more useful patterns that they *choose for themselves* rather than ones they fall into unconsciously.

To bring about new, healthier patterns, I did not have to force myself to do anything. I did not restrict, punish, or tell myself that I must get anything right. Instead, I identified where I was going wrong and gave myself the opportunity to bring about change by interrupting mis-use of emotion, thought, and muscle (my self). Not being overwhelmed by the sheer force of habit allows me to discover something better for myself in the moment. Because I have the knowledge and skill to decide what *not to do*, I am no longer beholden to my unconscious habits.*

**Even if becoming small and invisible protected me as a school student, it is no longer helpful in my adult life where I want to be able to express, practice, and get things wrong without fear.*

This new ability of choosing how I respond to situations pairs perfectly with learning new activities and skills. When I recently sat at a pottery wheel for the first time I noticed some of my habitual feelings rise up. Frustration at not being able to make a perfect pot the first time (rolling my eyes at myself here), anxiety of wondering if I would ever be good at this (classic me). Instead of getting lost in these thoughts and emotions, I was able to stop before the harmful pattern took hold and return to a calm, functional state. Knowing personally what *not to do* allowed me to stay curious, open, and ready to receive instruction from the teacher about what *to do* at the wheel.

By not getting in my own way and not doing the things that habitually held me back, I was able to learn freely and maintain my own sense of wellbeing. Reinforced by practice in class, my

curiosity, openness, and readiness to explore carries over and spills into all other parts of my life. With the Alexander Technique, studying a particular activity becomes a playground for learning about the self and choosing how to live in the world rather than just a chance to perfect a skill. Imagine how different education could be if we were all taught how to learn this way?

The Alexander Technique is a 130 year old method that uses principles, practice, and hands-on guidance to help individuals learn when they are getting in their own way. I invite you to dive in and see what is possible when you take a new approach to learning and education.

To learn more or schedule a consultation, visit <https://www.cassiemaloney.com/pages/alexandertechnique> or email Cassie at maloneymovement@gmail.com.

