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IN ACTION



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Using NLP and Positive Reinforcement to Teach the Alexander Technique

Presentation & Demonstration

David Owen

Introduction

I qualified with STAT via the Carrington tradition in 1990.

I also studied counselling, psychotherapy, and then Neuro-Linguistic Programming™ (NLP), sensing that people needed calm minds to have reliable good use. Then after my training, I developed various methods that improved, clarified and, incidentally, speeded up my teaching.

I was unsure that my approach would be welcomed by teachers, and I dropped out of touch for some years. However, sensing there might now be interest, I joined Alexander Technique International (ATI) in 2024 and attended their Autumn Conference. Here, I felt encouraged, and decided to pass on my methods to fellow teachers. Therefore, I applied to present at the 13th International Alexander Technique Congress.

ATI then invited articles for their *ExChange* magazine so I used this opportunity to organise my thoughts for my presentation. Non-ATI members can read this at: https://loosenuf.org/wp-content/uploads/ATI_Exchange_May2025_Using-NLP.pdf.

My Congress presentation and demonstration slides are at: https://loosenuf.org/wp-content/uploads/Dublin_Congress_Aug2025_Using-NLP.pdf.

This report further distills and clarifies my methods, as presented at the Congress.

Part 1. NLP and positive reinforcement

Neuro-Linguistic Programming™ (NLP) and positive reinforcement, part of conditioning, are said to be manipulative. However, we Alexander teachers already use conditioning extensively in our teaching. In fact, as humans, we can neither not communicate, nor not influence or manipulate each other. We can only learn how to influence and manipulate consciously, intentionally, effectively and, above all, respectfully. As we naturally already do many things involved in NLP and conditioning, you may recognise things that follow, that you already do.

NLP

NLP started when a maths and physics graduate, Richard Bandler, came across psychiatrists using the computers he was working on at Santa Cruz University.

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They had many theories about what was wrong with people, but few people could significantly help anyone. The few who could were said to be 'gifted', inferring that no one could learn their methods. Being inquisitive, and sure there must be patterns, Bandler wanted to study these successful ones.

Thinking in senses

From his observations, he posited that people think according to our five senses, plus language. An example of this is if you are in a restaurant, reading the menu. Notice the *sensory words*:

- You see the words 'Chickpea salad'.
- Inside your mind, you might *say* 'Chickpea salad' to yourself, or you might go straight to *seeing* what that would *look* like in your *imagination*.
- You know within your mind, what it would *smell* like, *taste* like, its *texture*, and how it would make you *feel* to eat it –
- And you *say* 'hmmm' to yourself, with either a positive, neutral, or negative internal *tonality* –
And that *tonality* gives you a *feeling* of whether you want it or not.
- You then go ahead and either actually order it or continue through the menu.

Differences in senses

Bandler also noticed that differences in how we process each sensory or linguistic channel markedly change our emotions and actions. As an example:

- Remember a time when you felt wonderful.
- Remember it as if you are back in the memory, seeing what you saw at the time, hearing the sounds around you, feeling any sensations, the air and the temperature, remembering any scents or tastes.
- Notice that this brings back a lot of the good feelings of this time.
- Now, *step out* of that memory and remember it as if you are looking back at yourself from, say, around 10 metres or 30 feet.
- Notice how the feelings associated with that memory are now a lot less.

Being 'associated' with or 'disassociated' from the same memory, greatly changes our experience of it. These differences are called 'Submodalities'. Examples are the distance and location of a remembered or imagined image, its brightness, sharpness, etc; the volume, clarity and location of remembered or imagined sounds etc. Some very effective therapists and coaches use these distinctions extensively.

Language

Together with co-developer Professor John Grinder, a linguist, he also developed two powerful language models:

- The Meta Model, which is incisive – recovering and correcting information from someone's communication, or used for communicating clearly – and
- The Milton Model, based on the hypnotic patterns of Dr Milton H. Erickson. These are suggestive and influential. Whereas Erickson used these instinctively, Bandler and Grinder observed and categorised them.

There are many other NLP aspects, but I mostly use these language patterns in my teaching.

Positive reinforcement

I set my first three Alexander pupils back by several lessons by giving them negative feedback. They became awkward and self-conscious. To avoid this, I adopted positive reinforcement instead. It simply means complementing people for doing what you want. My favourite sources for this are Karen Pryor, a dolphin trainer who started Clicker Training for dogs, and Ken Blanchard's *The One Minute Manager*.

The principles of Ken's book are:

- Be clear about what you want!
- Ignore everything you don't want, at least to start with.
- Praise the first (or early) instances of what you *do* want.
- Avoid criticism (according to Pryor 1985, p. 24, it can sometimes backfire, reinforcing the unwanted behaviour.)
- Take responsibility if something goes wrong and find a mutual solution.

In practice this means we need a clear definition of the Technique and how it works, and to give clear instructions for what we want our pupils to do.

Then, ignoring things like anticipation or endgaining in the early stages, *praise* their early instances of what you asked them to do.

As we progress, if my pupil starts endgaining or assisting, I may point it out, but if I have not introduced inhibition sufficiently, or I have accidentally triggered their helping habit, I will admit that to them, so that we can work together to establish inhibition and setting aside unwanted habits.

Drip feeding

There is a lot to the Technique, so to avoid overloading my pupils, I start simple, and drip feed them information. For this, I account for:

- The four stages of learning,
- Seven plus or minus two items of attention or memory, and
- Plate spinning.

The four stages of learning are:

1. **Unconscious incompetence:**
We start not realising we do not know something.
We had no concept of the Technique or its principles when we first encountered it.
2. **Conscious incompetence:**
We become aware of the Technique and its principles, but cannot put them into practice for ourselves. This can be disconcerting, so reassurance is sometimes required.
3. **Conscious competence:**
We are getting to grips with things, but have to pay close attention.
4. **Unconscious competence:**
The principles one by one come naturally without thinking, like riding a bicycle.

The Four Stages of Learning

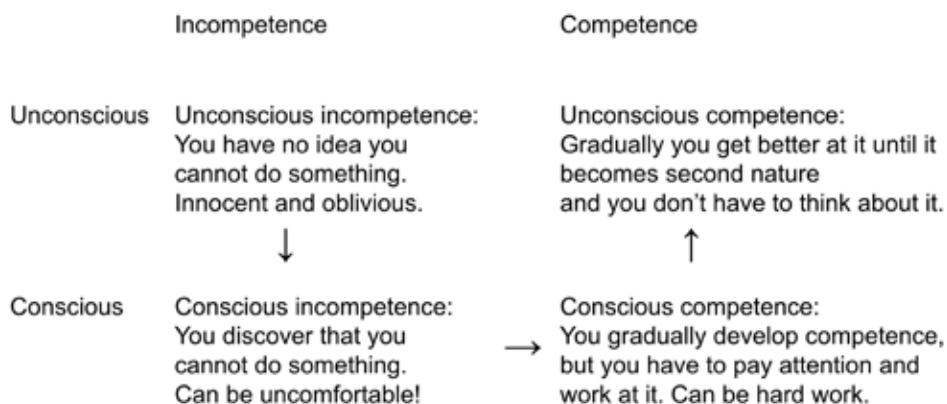


Fig. 1. The four stages of learning.

Seven plus or minus two

George A. Miller claimed that we could process or remember around seven things at once (Miller 1956). Actually, he found it was about five to nine items or seven plus or minus two. However, my motto here is:

$$7 \pm 2 = 4$$

So, I aim to give my pupils five or fewer things to deal with at once.

Plate spinning

As with the circus trick, with each new teaching aspect, I wait until my pupil has reached a certain proficiency, so that they have enough attention available before I introduce the next. This keeps them within four or five points of attention.

Part 2. Differences

As a result of my experiences and to implement the above, I have developed six main differences from how I was originally taught or understood the Technique:

1. Relaxation – established before remedying habits.
2. Thinking rather than directing.
3. Re-wording.
4. Away with forward and up!
5. Clarity, and I am talkative.
6. A definition of the Technique.

1. Relaxation

Towards the end of my training, I sensed that too much ‘forward and up’ caused strain and tension.

As a result of observing a very relaxed Alexander teacher, a very relaxed puppy and a psychotherapy teacher who had good relaxed poise without having had Alexander lessons – all in one day – I determined that we needed to relax away background tension *before* we could improve our use or remedy faulty habits.

Alexander was not keen on contemporary relaxation techniques. However, he did use lying down or table work, sometimes called ‘inhibition work’. Arguably, this did bring about the relaxation of various structures, though usually by indirect means, rather than telling someone to relax a certain part.

I use long table work sessions during four sessions within two weeks. With this I can usually eliminate most background tension early on and establish a new baseline, needing little further maintenance. If this frequency and baseline is not achieved, the work usually stagnates. However, one needs to go carefully releasing tighter necks, or it can lead to insecurity and neck spasms.

Once background tension has been reduced and I have coached my pupils in *trusting* their poise or buoyancy and natural coordination, any residual faulty coordination habits are much easier to remedy.

2. Thinking rather than ‘directing’

The saying goes: ‘What you think is what you get!’

I refrain from telling my pupils to *direct*. In the NLP Meta Model, the word *direct* is known as an *unspecified verb*. We don’t know how Alexander did it, though it seems he would:

Think of what he wanted, without doing it directly.

Consider when you point at an object. You have no concept of the muscles involved, and it is as if the finger is drawn towards the thing pointed at.

An upward direction of the head is analogous to pointing it to the ceiling or sky, and I sometimes use this with my pupils. However, I actually prefer the idea of buoyancy, as if their head is like a buoy, rising up on the tide, or as if it is made of anti-gravity material. I base this on the concept that our reflexes are designed to get the head to rise against gravity, as efficiently as possible.

3. Re-wording

Phrases such as ‘neck *free*’ or ‘neck *loose*’ or ‘*free* your neck’ get many people to waggle their heads to get a sensation of freedom in their neck.

The word *free* in ‘*free* your neck’ is an *imperative verb* or an order to *do* something. It is also another *unspecified verb* where we do not really know how Alexander did it.

‘*Think* of your neck being free’ is better, with *think* being the imperative verb, but it is still likely to produce head wagging to get the sensation of freedom. Eventually, I settled on:

‘*Think* of your neck being *soft, calm* and *relaxed*.’

These words neither imply nor require any movement.

I also tell my pupils: ‘*Avoid* trying to make it soft, calm and relaxed, and *avoid* trying to feel if it is that way. It doesn’t matter whether it feels that way or not. Just think of the idea.’

Notice that I avoid saying *don’t* as in ‘don’t *stiffen* your neck’, as what follows becomes an NLP Milton Model hypnotic *negative command* to stiffen their neck. The brain cannot process the negation until it has processed the stiffen, by which time it is often too late or sets up a conflict between the *don’t* and the *stiffen*, causing tension.

Instead of *don’t* I use *avoid, refrain* from, *keep* from, *stop*, etc.

4. Away with forward and up!

This is not a linguistic objection. According to Penelope Easton (Easton 2025), referencing Jenifer Kellow (Kellow 2009), Alexander’s ‘forward and up’ direction was due to habits as a result of his breathing difficulties from

his premature birth. This would have resulted in him pulling his head back to try to get more breath.

Alexander is explicit that he not only had to put his head forward from his habitual back, but also up, to *prevent* it going forward and *down!* *Only after* this point in 'Evolution of a Technique' (Alexander 1985 [1932], p. 29) does he claim he had been pulling his head back *and* down!

I rarely see people pulling their heads back: with background tension, they mostly stoop or slump, a bit, or a lot, or they fight it with extra effort to keep their head up. I believe we need a different universal set of directions for any condition or position, and to maintain ideal alignment.

Stooping is a result of contracted upper trapezius fibres and contracted sternocleidomastoids, as in the startle pattern. So having told my pupil to: 'Think of your neck being soft, calm, and relaxed', I then tell them to:

'Think of the *back* of your head releasing away from the rest of your body.'
Releasing the upper trapezius.

Then for sternocleidomastoid release, while lying down, I tell them to:
'Think of the *rest* of your head also releasing away from the rest of your body.'

Or, while sat or stood, I tell them to:

'Think of your head *rising* up away from your body', or 'Think of your head being *buoyant*, as if it wants to lift up the rest of your body.'

I will indicate the *top* of their head as the focus of the lift, rather than them thinking of their face or eyes rising. Soon, I will coach them in having the buoyancy, or anti-gravity of their head, be strong enough to lift them to being upright in a chair, or to stand them up, keeping them poised while moving, or to float them up stairs and hills, etc.



Fig. 2. Away with Forward and up!

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5. Clarity, and I am talkative!

I was taught nearly silently for two and a half years. By contrast, for positive reinforcement, people need:

- A very clear idea of what the Technique is,
- A clear idea of how it works for them, and
- A clear idea of what I expect of them from moment to moment.

I therefore need to be quite verbal and tell my pupils:

- What I am doing,
- Its purpose and intended outcome,
- What I want *them* to do, and how,
- What and how to think, and
- What to avoid or refrain from doing.

I then give them positive feedback as to how well they are doing.

I need to introduce concepts gradually to avoid overload. I will usually give a rounded yet simple explanation of the Technique at the beginning of my work with them, and I will check with them that they have reasonable comprehension as I go along. In subsequent lessons I will only bring up the subjects that I want my pupil to work with at that time.

When it is relevant, I will gradually explain table work, the various ways I use chair work, standing up, sitting down, walking, whispered 'ahs', and application work.

To keep the plates spinning, I will repeat particular points, saying, 'As I have mentioned before', 'As I keep repeating', etc., as softeners. The many novel aspects of the work justify this until the pupil has a full understanding.

6. Definition of the Technique

To attain a goal, we need to know what it is. While I had lessons, the Technique was a mystery. I didn't know where I was going and I took ages to get there. In the 1990s the definition of the Technique was, 'What is written in Alexander's books', which I believe is inadequate! Currently, STAT's definition includes:

. . . based on the *teaching, practice, theory and* writings of F. Matthias Alexander
. . . (STAT 1, my italics and emphasis)

This widens the scope a bit.
STAT's website currently says:

. . . teaching you to change long-standing habits that *cause* unnecessary tension . . . (STAT 2, my italics)

I actually maintain it is the other way around, that background tension sets up compensatory habits. However, Alexander started out with habits from his premature birth.

Often we define a thing by what it *does* or achieves – and by *how* it achieves it.

What it does

My first experience of the Technique was of something *natural* being awakened within me. So my first definition would be: ‘A way to return to our natural state and functioning’ (or, at least closer to it).

In *The Resurrection of the Body* Alexander is quoted as saying:

When an investigation comes to be made, it will be found that every single thing we are doing in the Work is exactly what is being done in Nature where the conditions are right, the difference being that we are learning to do it consciously. (Maisel 1987 [1974], p. 7)

I personally argue that we are learning to consciously *prevent* and *reverse* whatever disturbs or distorts our natural state.

What disturbs our natural state, and what can restore it?

I believe it is background tension that then sets up compensatory habits. The tension mostly seems to come from unreleased startle pattern.

What can restore it?

Using Alexander’s unique principles.

Plus a way to reduce background tension.

What is unique about the Alexander Technique? How does it do it?

- Alexander’s breathing techniques, including the whispered ‘ah’.
- Recognition of the force of habit and faulty sensory awareness.
- Directing.
- Utilising the primary control.
- Inhibition, and
- Conscious choice.

A possible definition of the Technique

Putting all this together, I propose the following:

- A way of thinking that enables you to relax below the plateau level that most people think of as relaxation, even when active.
- This is combined with a unique way of making better choices and decisions, and of avoiding and undoing unwanted habits.
- Together, they restore your natural poise and buoyancy, tone, fluidity, and coordination. You stand taller, and you move more effortlessly, more efficiently, more skilfully, and – when needed – more powerfully.

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- It improves your performance in all areas of life: work, sport, performing, and pleasure.
- The freedom, fluidity, and poise make you look more attractive, feel more confident, and give you more presence and charisma. You are more clear headed, calm and serene, more alert, and in the zone, groove, or flow. It is a natural state of mindfulness or 'Zen', and you have more natural joy.
- The relaxation and poise relieves pressure on your muscles, bones and joints, and even your internal organs. This way they can naturally repair themselves as much as possible from any damage, including from the results of previous background tension or any mis-coordination caused by it.
- Above all, it allows you to be your full, true, authentic and natural self!

The first two are *how* it does it, and the last five are *what* it does.

I do not expect everyone to immediately adopt this, though I suggest people consider its possible merits, both as a practical goal to work towards and as being clear and easy to understand.

Part 3. Demonstrations and Coaching

There is a detailed description of my teaching stages, their criteria, and scripts of my wording on the presentation slides. I was unable to present this due to lack of time.

On the Thursday after a recap, I showed examples of how I work and had participants practice.

NLP & positive reinforcement sequences

Working in pairs, one as a pupil, the other as a teacher. Instructions are mostly to the teacher.

Sequence – Head and neck

Invite your pupil to sit down in a chair with their hands on their thighs.

Thank them for it (positive reinforcement).

Tell them, 'I am going to put my hands on your neck.'

Do so in your usual way, yet without directing them forward or up.

Then say, 'I want you to think of your neck being soft, calm, and relaxed.'

(You think the same, both of your own neck and theirs.)

Assuming that they thought this, even if you detect no sign, say 'Good' softly.

And as soon as you sense their neck responding, you say, 'Good!', a little more firmly.

Still with your hands on their neck, contacting their occiput, tell them:

‘While still thinking of your neck being soft, calm, and relaxed – I want you to think of the back of your head releasing away from the rest of your body.’

You can give them very gentle direction to release any holding there.

If you sense they are already released, or they release even a little, say, ‘Good!’

If there is not detectable release, cycle round:

‘Still thinking of your neck – soft, calm, and relaxed, and the back of your head releasing . . .’

Once that is established add:

‘And now think of the rest of your head also releasing away from the rest of your body, as if it is buoyant, like a buoy rising up on the tide, or as if it is made of anti gravity material.’

Assist and encourage with upward direction, and again complement when you sense a release.

Sequence – Inhibition and arms

Tell your pupil, ‘In a moment I am going to lift up your (left) hand and arm.’

The pretend pupil can deliberately anticipate or assist a little here.

It is important for the teacher to *ignore* any anticipatory movement until they have introduced the concept of inhibition;
i.e. ignore anything you don’t want!

Teacher: lower the pupil’s arm back to their lap.

The teacher can now introduce the idea of inhibition by saying:

‘In order to change anything, we need to be able to put aside, or refrain from what we would ordinarily have done.’

The teacher then says, ‘So, I am going to lift your arm again, and what I want you to do is just let it happen without assisting.

Just ignore me and – ’

‘Leave all the work and *weight*, for me.’

At the word *weight*, you can start to lift their arm.

This is deliberately ambiguous: the other meaning being:

‘Leave all the work, and *wait* for me.’

If the pupil assists, stop lifting without comment. As soon as they stop assisting, or they just let you lift it, say, ‘Good! Thank you!’

Having lifted their arm this time, now lower it to let it dangle at their side.

Repeat this for the other side, saying, ‘Again, just leave all the work and weight, for me.’

Note that ambiguity is an NLP Milton Model hypnotic pattern that forces the brain to process both meanings. While it is doing this, it tends to withhold action, during which time you can move the person without their anticipation or assistance.

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Sequence – Arms release

Let their arms dangle. Place your fingers below the fingers of their left hand, only just touching, and say:

‘I want you to think of your fingertips releasing towards the floor and away from the back of your head.’

Move your hand down as they release, maintaining only very light contact.

You can also maintain light contact on their occiput to encourage release there.

Praise them: ‘Good! – Excellent!’, etc., as they continue to release.

Before or if they start to lean over, tell them:

‘Also, think of the fingertips of your other hand also releasing towards the floor and away from the back of your head.’

And before or if they start leaning forward, tell them to keep thinking of their head as if it is buoyant, etc.

Cycle through neck, back of head release, and head buoyancy as required while releasing their arms.



Fig. 3. Arm release.

Sequence – Standing up

I also demonstrated ambiguity while standing a pupil from a chair.

Having a pupil sitting upright, ensure that they are ready to be stood.

Say,

‘I want you to think of where your head will be when – ’

At this point, take them into standing, while saying,

‘You *are* standing!’

The ambiguity is between the hypothetical ‘*when* you are standing’ and the statement ‘You *are* standing!’

You distract the student momentarily by telling them to think of where their head will be when –, leaving a question with them, so you can start standing them before they expect it. When you say, ‘You are standing’, it completes the sentence – and their neurology imagines their head where it will be, giving it direction.

This can be refined and coached so that with practice the pupil can stand, simply by thinking of where their head will be once they have stood.

Part 4. Summary

I developed ways to teach the Technique more easily and more understandably, and unintentionally this speeded up my teaching.

I call my system Loosen uPTM. It is a way to loosen and to naturally rise up. It is *not* a replacement for the Alexander Technique, but a way of teaching it. I plan to teach it, and NLP, to Alexander Teachers. I also plan promoting the Technique to the public, along with lists of teacher organisations and individual teachers open to my methods. If you would like to be on this list, please let me know at david@loosenuptm.org.

I have always been conscientious to stay true to core principles. The Alexander Technique is too valuable to be watered down or fudged. To my mind, inhibition and conscious choice are the most unique and valuable of Alexander’s contributions to the world.

In the current climate, where inhibition and the ability to make considered judgements and wise decisions seem sadly lacking – *the Alexander Technique is needed more than ever!*

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David Owen enjoyed a career in industry, medical physics, and as an engineer in the BBC. He had lessons in the Technique for two and a half years before training with Jeanne Haahr (née Day) (STAT/Carrington) in Totnes, Devon, UK. While training, he also studied counselling and psychotherapy. He then trained in Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) to trainer level, including with Dr Richard Bandler, its originator, and assisted on his trainings. He has used NLP in his teaching, therapeutically and as a trainer, and has taught the Alexander Technique since 1990. He lives in Plymouth, England, with his wife and two cats.

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