
ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE TEACHER EDUCATION AN INTEGRATED VIEW OF PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE

by Terry Fitzgerald

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INTRODUCTION

What will the future demand of Alexander Technique teaching as a profession? Indeed, by what right do we even call our work a profession, when in many locations our academic qualifications are not recognised alongside those of school teachers or even chiropractors and acupuncturists? But if we seek such recognition, what might we have to surrender, and would it be worth the effort? This paper attempts to review a number of these issues, particularly in relation to the relevance and applicability of competency-based training (CBT) to Alexander Technique (AT) teacher education. Although the development of standards of professional competency and assessment is examined in the light of current Australian government procedures for recognising training courses operating within its vocational education and training (VET) sector, these issues are relevant to AT teachers and societies throughout the world. Recommendations are made for continuing discussion, reflection and research.

COMPETENCY-BASED TRAINING

May I begin by asking those of you who are certified AT Teachers to take some time to reflect on the following questions? What criteria were used in assessing your competence to teach the Technique? Who formulated those criteria? Did you ever see them in written form? Who assessed you as competent? What were the qualifications and experience of your assessor(s)? Was any account taken of your experience of the Technique prior to training, for example, the number of lessons or workshops you'd attended? Were any other prior skills or accomplishments taken into account, for example as a school teacher, a nurse, a parent, a business person?

As an AT teacher educator, my interest in this subject stems from speculating on the possibility of accreditation of AT teacher training courses under the Australian government's National Training Framework (NTF).[1] Underpinned by a competency-based approach, the intention of this framework is to simplify the way training is regulated, define who is responsible for it and describe how high standards of quality can be guaranteed. It also allows for private providers such as AT training courses to request through regional authorities that their courses and qualifications be nationally recognised. This, in turn, would allow their students access to student visas and study

grants, as well as pathways to higher qualifications and degrees.

Of course, it's possible that AUSTAT and the wider profession could decide that any benefits derived from adoption of the framework would be outweighed by the financial, administrative and political costs of dismantling and redesigning the familiar teacher training structures. As well, the rules that govern AUSTAT's rights to membership of the international group of Affiliated Societies (AS) would need to be taken into account. Deviation from these rules—for example, changing from a time-based structure to CBT—could jeopardise its AS affiliation. There might also be political costs associated with restrictions on the independence and creativity of individual teacher educators.

COMPETENCY STANDARDS

The educational paradigm of CBT and assessment is outcomes based. In other words, when learners have demonstrated competence in each of the industry-identified modules of their work, craft or profession they may be credentialled accordingly. Regardless of the time spent in training, the certified accumulation of an appropriate number of these credentials through recognition of prior learning or current training may lead to a qualification.

Whether or not AT teacher educators agree with the premises underpinning CBT, the concept of competency is not so strange. At some point all certified AT teachers were deemed “competent” by a training course director whose criteria were probably aligned with the STAT list of five beginning teacher competencies:

1. an understanding of Alexander's [terminology]
2. an ability to convey this understanding to the pupil, both manually and verbally
3. some knowledge of F.M. Alexander's life and the history of the Technique
4. an ability to effect a change in the “use” of a pupil
5. an ongoing expectation of change in [her/his] own “use”[2]

As far as I can tell, however, most AT teacher educators aim to develop these competencies by relying on their own experience and continuity of process over time to effect trainee competence rather than any systematic adherence to a curriculum. It would indeed require a paradigm shift for many of these educators to design their curricula using CBT terms.

The AS agreement, moreover, endorses a program formularised by STAT that includes a minimum attendance time before qualification of 1600 hours spread evenly over three years. This time-based rule on teacher training is quite prescriptive, allowing very little room for such things as natural ability, prior learning, experience or accelerated skill acquisition. Many AT teachers are still quite attached to this model, even though I understand it was instigated to satisfy British Home

Office visa rules so that overseas students could train in London with one of Alexander's successors.

I remember my astonishment at being told this by a well-known teacher educator at an unofficial STAT meeting in London in 1994—that a bureaucratic edict, not necessarily a requirement of Alexander himself, had begun a pedagogic principle most of our profession has been subscribing to for at least forty years. I can only wonder how many other of our ideological certainties, which would also have been simply the preferences of the dominant stakeholders of the time, have been uncritically accepted in our work over the years and since become habits. And yet while some present day policy makers have begun questioning the residency rule and suggesting alternative ideas, it does seem strange to hear of proposals for part-time courses that insist on the same number of hours being spread over more than three years, as though the figure 1600 had some particular educational significance.

AT teacher educators keen on the persistence of a three year program may be able to make a convincing case for it based on the importance of group interaction and the personal development that it allows. As well, given that most training courses operate on the basis that senior students practise their teaching skills by working with the juniors, who in turn use the opportunity to reflect on the process, other evidence could be gathered to support the value of time-based programs for skill formation. Supporters of fixed term programs might also argue that some sorts of prior learning and pre-existing formal qualifications may even hinder a trainee's progress if these things have led to fixity of thinking, reduced bodily freedom or the need to spend extra time unlearning them.

These claims may be true, but apart from Alexander's brother, A.R. Alexander,[3] and perhaps a small group of his contemporaries, very few students have had the experience of beginning a training course wondering if they might be competent enough to be certified in fewer than three years. Such a possibility would significantly colour a trainee's attitude to learning.

In May 1998 *STATNews* supplied a supplementary "Operational Review", prepared by consultant Alex Scott,[4] which summarises the responses to a recent questionnaire it sent to STAT teacher members asking for their opinions on various matters, ranging from administration and advertising to ethics and professional standards. In the matter of training and accreditation Scott recommends that proper academic standards be applied, and links forged with a university or "training validator" to produce a recognised qualification.[5] Reflecting the growing awareness by rank-and-file STAT members of the lack of consistent competency standards for the AT profession, particularly at beginning teacher level, Scott also states:

There appears to be a reluctance to countenance change and considerable unhappiness amongst [trainees] as to the overall efficacy of their training courses in terms of equipping them to be teachers... Although the Technique is an art, a craft that is difficult to assess other than by a period of continuous assessment by an experienced teacher, some greater degree of conformity between courses is clearly essential... Dialogue with universities, both with re-

gard to academic courses and proper scientific research, should be strongly encouraged.[6]

DEVELOPMENT OF STANDARDS

Chappell and Melville[7] draw on research techniques for tapping into the collective experience of professional practitioners that are explicated by Gonczi, Hager and Oliver in their book *Establishing Competency-Based Standards in the Professions*. [8] Foremost in this description is what Gonczi et al call the “integrated approach” to conceptualising professional competency, as represented by their definition of a competent professional as someone who has the attributes necessary for job performance to the appropriate standards. The emphasis is on three key elements—attributes (such as knowledge, abilities, skills and attitudes), performance (of roles or tasks) and standards (of performance and for assessment purposes). Embedded in this definition is the clear distinction between performance, which is directly observable, and competence, which is not directly observable but can be inferred from performance in combination with evidence of possession of other attributes such as specialised knowledge and skills.

Just how many stakeholders in AT teacher education will support the philosophical underpinnings of CBT may depend on how they conceptualise it from within their own local political and cultural education systems. In some countries, where CBT may still emphasise precise, atomistic descriptions of “outcomes” and assessment criteria, AT practitioners would probably, and rightly, think of it as contrary to the principles of the AT itself. However, I would say the integrated or “broader” view of competency-based learning is consistent with the AT in that they both belong to the humanistic, interpretive educational paradigm. As Chappell, Gonczi and Hager say, this view of CBT:

[D]oes not confuse performance with competence, and argues that a large variety of attributes which underpins performance must be addressed in any competency analysis... It emphasises human agency and social interrelations in competency descriptions. It regards competence as developmental and elaborative rather than static and minimalist. It places great importance on groups of practitioners coming together and through a process of debate and dialogue, developing competency descriptions of practice... It views descriptions of competence as being open to renegotiation and change... [9]

Preston and Walker call this broader view of professional competency “holistic”, [10] in the tradition of John Dewey whose influence on this discourse can be glimpsed in the following paraphrasing of Dewey:

In order to perform adequately in the phases of thinking, one needs a number of qualities, abilities and attitudes. They will be classified under those headings, although it will be im-

possible to give them full meaning in isolation. Their meanings are essentially to be sought in the interrelationships existing among them.[11]

Notwithstanding that Alexander and Dewey were friends for 36 years, and that Alexander's influence on Dewey is increasingly acknowledged,[12] I suggest that a holistic perspective that includes the integrated approaches of Gonczi et al[13] and other writers, along with the "Key Competencies" approach to learning and assessment,[14] would be contextually appropriate for future research and development into AT teacher education.

I am hypothesising here that we will eventually generate an holistic, competency-based model of AT teacher training in which a teaching certificate would be granted after appropriate assessment, regardless of the length of time spent formally at a training school. This of course would mean more than 1600 hours attendance when necessary. Evidence of prior learning would be an integral part of the system, so that, for example, a trainee's earlier private lessons, anatomy classes or school teaching experience could be taken into account. There may even be a case to be made for stages of qualification, beginning with a probationary accreditation, followed by full registration after a period of continuing education, supervision by a mentor and further assessment.

Of course, after so many years of using the more easily managed, quantifiable fixed term system, our stakeholders in AT teacher education may find that the changes in pedagogic and administrative habits required to adapt to the qualitative approach to CBT will be considerable. In the next instalment of this paper I will discuss the concomitant question of assessment of competence, not only of beginning AT teachers but also of their educators.

In the previous issue of *Direction* I introduced the idea that future Alexander Technique (AT) teacher education policies might benefit from taking into account the contemporary educational theories of competency based training (CBT). In the second installment of this paper I will look at the parallel question of competency assessment, not only of beginning AT teachers but also of their educators.

ASSESSMENT OF AT TEACHER COMPETENCIES

A major difficulty that would face the AT profession in any attempt to implement competency based training and assessment lies in its lack of “industry endorsed assessment guidelines”. This is compounded by the lack of instructions on teacher training from Alexander himself and the plethora of often conflicting opinions from his many successors as to what good teaching means in practical terms. A far-reaching conceptualisation of teaching competence would need to be agreed upon by the profession both intra- and internationally before competency assessment guidelines might even be brought up for discussion.

By tradition, assessment of AT teacher trainees’ progress is continuous over the residency period and it is the prerogative of course directors to certify each trainee as competent after at least three years attendance. This master and apprentice type of assessment, where the teacher and assessor are the same person, is based on a lengthy relationship and possibly biased. Ultimately, each assessor/director has his or her reputation at stake, as determined by the peer opinion, but this would probably be regarded as insufficient quality assurance in the culture of CBT.

In 1992, STAT established an “independent panel of moderators” to oversee and report back on training standards and trainee competence at the schools within its jurisdiction. These moderators are senior teachers and/or faculty members of training programs but, although their recommendations are taken into account, they have no authority to pass or fail the students or regulate the schools they assess. As I understand it, their terms of reference for student appraisal are the following five technical skills, mentioned in the first of this paper (refer *Direction* Vol. 2, No. 10)

1. an understanding of Alexander’s terminology;
2. an ability to convey this understanding to the pupil, both manually and verbally;
3. some knowledge of F.M. Alexander’s life and the history of the Technique;
4. an ability to effect a change in the “use” of a pupil;
5. an ongoing expectation of change in [her/his] own “use.”[2]

While this list does not mention the integrated or higher level competencies I also alluded to, as a monitoring template it is a healthy example of external auditing of beginning teacher competencies and mitigates the bias, confusion and possible upset that can occur with the apprenticeship model. In line with this, the introduction of portfolios might well be considered by those AT professional stakeholders interested in recording competencies. Learners would be accountable for creating and maintaining their portfolios in such a way that they could be presented to accrediting authorities as well as being a form of continuously updated CV for viewing by prospective clients and employers. This approach could have the additional advantage of introducing them to the value of lifelong learning.

At this point I would like to highlight what is generally regarded as an important higher-level competency for teachers and their educators, namely reflectivity.[15]

REFLECTIVE THINKING

John Dewey published the second edition of his seminal book on reflective thinking, *How we think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process* in 1933,[16] the year after his third and last introduction to Alexander's books appeared in *The Use of the Self*.[17] In that introduction he describes his experience of reflective thinking as Alexander's pupil:

In re-affirming my conviction as to the scientific character of Mr Alexander's discoveries and technique, I do so then not as one who has experienced a "cure", but as one who has brought whatever intellectual capacity he has to the study of a problem. In the study I found the things which I had "known"—in the sense of theoretical belief—in philosophy and psychology, changed into vital experiences which gave a new meaning to knowledge of them.[18]

While the expression "reflection" is not often found in the lexicon of AT teachers, it seems to me that if AT teacher trainees are learning anything at all they should be learning to think reflectively. Unlike other models of professionalism built solely around technical expertise, Schön's model of "reflection-in-action"[19] has become recognised by educational researchers as central to professional practice,[20] and deserves the study of AT teacher educators.

Reflection-in-action refers to the process of responding to an unexpected or inconsistent phenomenon by reflecting on and rethinking one's initial understanding of it, constructing a new description of it and testing that intuitive theory in an action experiment. A reflective practitioner becomes a researcher into his or her own practice, a self-educator constantly learning, not just applying time-worn procedures to seemingly repetitive problems. Schön points out that clients may also need to be educated to this way of thinking, particularly if they are used to unquestioning deference to their practitioners.[21] This is the context for reflective contracts between practitioner

and client which call for:

competences which may be strange to [the practitioner]. Whereas he [sic] is ordinarily expected to play the role of expert, he is now expected from time to time to reveal his uncertainties. Whereas he is ordinarily expected to keep his expertise private and mysterious, he is now expected to reflect publicly on his knowledge-in-practice, and to make himself confrontable by his clients.[22]

For adult educators, Brookfield highlights the importance of another dimension to reflection, “critical reflection”, which links in with the learning of democratic habits by both teachers and students.[23] More than coming to a clearer understanding of our actions and identities by freeing ourselves of distorted ways of reasoning and acting, both personally and professionally, to reflect critically is:

[T]o understand how considerations of power undergird, frame, and distort educational processes and interactions [and] to question assumptions and practices that seem to make our teaching lives easier but actually work against our best long-term interests.”[24]

Processes of critical reflection characteristically utilise group discussion, journals and logs. However, with regard to AT teacher education, as distinct from post-graduate training, I wonder whether it may be more appropriate not to emphasise this critical aspect of reflection until trainees can sustain themselves well enough during any emotional reactions that might be stirred up by either these processes or the intensity of their AT work.

Hunt also points out some consequences for the faculty members who are teaching “reflective practice”.[25] As they practise it themselves they may also have to confront and articulate issues about their own responsibility and accountability. And even though they may be unqualified as counsellors, they may be called upon by their reflective students to give therapeutic advice. Or the student might challenge the structure of the learning environment and even leave it. Moving between roles of confessor and assessor also puts added pressure on a teacher’s relationships to learners. Based on their experience with these problems, Hunt and her associates have developed an academic practice model that aims to keep reflection within appropriate boundaries, in their case the cognitive domain. AT teacher educators might take heed of this advice and teach reflective practice only to the extent that they can manage its consequences with integrity.

In the next section I will explore briefly some issues regarding the competencies and accreditation of AT teacher educators, in particular the training course directors.

COMPETENCIES OF AT TEACHER EDUCATORS

Despite the fact that waiver clauses of member societies often allow them to change certain rules in unusual circumstances, the AS usually specify that an applicant for Directorship of a training course needs only to have a minimum number of years (seven to twelve, depending on the Society) experience as a teacher plus a minimum time spent working on training courses. No other academic qualifications—educational, sociological or managerial—are deemed necessary. Many accomplished AT teacher educators do not have any sort of externally recognised qualification, let alone a teaching degree, and it is unlikely they would feel the need for extra formal study. However, the Australian VET system specifies that technically competent trainers employed by registered private providers should have at least a Workplace Trainer Category 2 qualification for ‘off-the-job’ or sessional training. If Australian AT teacher educators were to apply for government recognition of their courses in the current culture of CBT, the AS minimum qualification standards would be insufficient. In addition, research suggests that for institutional based teaching a diploma or certificate in education is desirable, and for higher level positions a degree that includes teaching and management competencies.[26]

The US Society of Teachers of the AT (AmSAT) has by-laws that are more demanding than the AS minimum and which specify that an applicant for director status should have accumulated a minimum number of “credit units” through post-graduate attendance at AT-based events such as workshops, conferences and annual meetings.[27] Beth Stein also describes in detail the attributes and skills, personal qualities and other competencies the Training Course Approval Committee would prefer training course directors (and presumably all other AT teacher educators) to possess.[28] The following six “expressions of ability” areas correspond to higher level competency units, each of which has a set of elements too lengthy to list here:

1. knowledge base
2. experience
3. pedagogical skills
4. interpersonal/intrapersonal communication [skills]
5. ethical grounding
6. professional integrity

To accompany these competencies the AmSAT committee has also compiled a list of sample questions that it may ask of potential training course directors in person or by phone as part of its assessment process. This is a commendable move towards demanding professional accountability.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Underpinning the re-educational philosophy of the AT is the principle of stopping in order to check the appropriateness of habitual reactions to stimuli and thereby allowing for more thoughtfully considered responses to occur. In this sense, I believe that insufficient thought has been given to AT teacher training systems and that, as a profession, we are still relying on habitual pedagogies that have survived barely examined for at least forty years. From an Australian perspective, there is considerable research yet to be done to find a training and assessment model for at teacher competence which would satisfy both the National Training Framework and the particular needs of our work.

If we want our work to expand and be fully recognised as a teaching profession by governments and communities worldwide we must nurture within it a culture of inquiry and self-reflection. Indeed, compared with the time and effort put into studying the physiological, and perhaps psychological, attributes of the AT, scarcely any academically viable research has ever been undertaken into at teacher education. Those who are keen to enhance our professional standing need to sponsor debate and research into the development of consistent and holistic professional competency standards and assessment policies that accurately reflect not only Alexander's principles but also current educational theories, particularly Competency-Based Training.

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<http://www.alexander-school.com/>

ENDNOTES

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 3. Planning and Organising Activities

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