

## Tipping Points

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In Part I, I will present a brief overview of the material I covered in my presentation, ‘Taking the Alexander Technique Mainstream: To tip or not to tip?’ at the 8th International Congress, August 2008. I offered a broad outline of the elements that bring an idea to its tipping point, expanding on the idea of messages that stick. As a group, we then considered the pros and cons of having the Alexander Technique tip.

In Part II, I will share what I see as the crucial 20% (this refers to the 80/20 rule cited later in this piece) that will have a dynamic impact on our profession. This is based on the experiences, information and conclusions I have synthesised up to this point in my involvement in our profession. My ideas are not new or groundbreaking. I have heard them articulated in many different ways over the years. I share my current thinking as an example of the personal evolution I have moved through in my professional identity. This process is one I encourage each and every one of us to undertake. Perhaps we’ll amass the 20% in our sense of professional identity to tip the Alexander Technique to take hold in the world.

### PART I TAKING THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE MAINSTREAM: TO TIP OR NOT TO TIP?

In *The Tipping Point*, author Malcolm Gladwell examines the dynamics that create epidemics and cultural phenomena. The Alexander Technique has been around for over 100 years, and yet remains on the fringe. What would it take for the Alexander Technique to be in the mainstream like yoga and Pilates? What would be our concerns as teachers and as a profession if Alexander Technique were to ‘tip’? The tipping point is:

That magic moment when an idea, trend or social behavior crosses a threshold, tips and spreads like wildfire.

*Malcolm Gladwell, 2002, back cover*

According to Gladwell, the key components that generate the momentum for a tip to occur are ‘stickiness’; the 80/20 Rule; and the law of the few: mavens, connectors and salespeople (Gladwell 2002, p. 29).

*Stickiness*: a message packaged in a simple way that, under the right circumstances, is irresistible and changes people’s behaviour. For example: Paul Revere, ‘The British are coming!’ (Heath and Heath 2007, p. 253). (Below is more detail on elements that make for a ‘stickier’ message, as outlined in *Made to Stick* by Chip Heath and Dan Heath.)

The participants agreed that, as a profession, we have yet to find a sticky answer to the question, ‘What is the Alexander Technique?’ We do not use effective language in describing the benefits of the Technique or in positioning ourselves in the marketplace.

*The 80/20 rule*: Based on the Pareto principle, the 80–20 rule states that, for many events, 80% of the effects come from 20% of the causes (wikipedia.org 1).

When I coach a colleague in building her or his practice, I recommend systematically analysing the results of each marketing method she or he has undertaken, in order to determine which is most effective so as to focus future efforts and resources on doing what works, and dropping what doesn’t. Methods might include building a mailing list and sending articles, newsletters and special offers; developing an email subscriber list for an online newsletter; offering free or lowcost introductory events to expose new potential students to the work; participating in networking or leads passing groups; advertising; developing referral relationships with other practitioners who offer complementary services; educating your current students on how to effectively make referrals; selling gift certificates for your services; offering incentives to current students who send referrals; developing a product to sell, such as a book or au-

dio file of a 'self-lesson' as a way to generate income and build name recognition for your own practice and for the Alexander Technique; or having a website presence and effectively driving traffic to your site with optimisation and marketing programs such as Google Ad Words. When a teacher has sub-specialties or works with a niche population, it is important to determine which niche is most successful, and focus marketing efforts on that group.

The participants shared what they each found to be their 20%, i.e. the marketing methods that are consistently most effective when compared with all the methods they are using at any given time, and we agreed that it would be helpful to share those 'best practices' so we needn't each reinvent the wheel.

*The Law of the Few: connectors, mavens and salespeople (wikipedia.org 2)*

*Connectors* are the people who link us with the world and those who have a special gift for bringing the world together. Examples include Paul Revere (of the midnight ride) and Kevin Bacon (of the game 'Six Degrees to Kevin Bacon', wikipedia.org 2). (To see how 'connected' you are, visit [www.gladwell.com/tippingpoint/tp\\_excerpt2.html](http://www.gladwell.com/tippingpoint/tp_excerpt2.html) and take the phonebook test, [malcolmgladwell.com](http://malcolmgladwell.com) 3).

*Mavens* are information specialists or people we rely upon to connect us with new information. They accumulate knowledge, especially about the marketplace, and know how to share it with others (wikipedia.org 2). You could liken them to living, breathing 'consumer reports'.

*Salesmen* are persuaders, charismatic people with powerful negotiation skills. They tend to have an indefinable trait that goes beyond what they say, a trait that makes others want to agree with them. They can counter resistance and objections with information and persuasion (wikipedia.org 2).

Many of us possess these characteristics or have colleagues, clients, family or other advocates who do. Perhaps you have a client who sends people to you on a regular basis. Maybe you are a font of knowledge and people come to you when they

need a referral to a doctor, a recommendation of a good hotel, or information about where to shop for the best organic produce at the best price.

*More on Stickiness*

In their book, *Made to Stick*, Chip and Dan Heath expand on the concept of stickiness. The acronym they've coined is SUCCESS (Heath and Heath 2007, p. 18).

*S – simple.* Simple = core + compact. Messages that stick are simple, elegant and prioritised. Start with the punchline, don't bury the lead (Heath & Heath, 2007, p. 253). Example: my favourite tagline, which I first heard from colleague Marjorie Dorfman and which is widely used by chiropractors, is 'If you wear out your body, where are you going to live?'

*U – unexpected.* Use the element of surprise to generate interest. Mystery can be effective in drawing people in. For example: 'What simple everyday movement can harm you if done incorrectly, and help to heal you if done right?' Use a message that's counterintuitive (Heath & Heath, 2007, p. 254). For example: 'You're not slumped because you're lazy or weak. You're slumped because some of your muscles are working *too hard!*'

*C – concrete.* People need to understand and remember. Fables teach a moral that people live by or at least quote in day-to-day life. Use clear examples to make your point. (Heath & Heath, 2007, p. 254) Example: stand up, clench your butt, pull your tummy to your belly button: sit down and stand up, but don't let go... Now, let go and sit down and stand up again. Which is easier? We're holding on/clenching most of the time, even if we don't feel it. Another example: one participant shared how she hands her students a ten-pound weight and tells them, 'This is how much your head weighs – maybe more!'

*C – credible.* Quote an authority or expert to lend credibility to your message. Examples: four out of five dentists recommend . . . The *British Medical Journal* just published a study showing Alexander Technique to have long-term benefits in reducing chronic back pain – or you can cite an anti-authority or non-authority. Our students' testimonials, told in their own words,

lend great credibility to any claims we make (Heath & Heath 2007, p. 255). Example (this is an unsolicited testimonial from a student who had two 50-minute classes, a year apart): ‘I just wanted to write and thank you for teaching classes at Kutztown University. I just had back surgery to shave down some herniated discs, and the only way I was able to get up and sit down was by using what I learned in the classes. Without your teachings, this past month of recovery would have gone a lot slower and I wouldn’t have been able to start physical therapy for at least another few weeks, when I am able to start next week. From what I have experienced, this technique will not only help me live a happier, pain-free life, but will also help with my trombone playing. I can’t express the excitement I had when I used this method – it worked for me.’

*E – emotional.* Make people care, appeal to their self-interest at higher levels (such as their desire to help others and make a difference). Connect to their identity – who they want to be, rather than who they are (Heath & Heath 2007, pp. 255–6). Example: ‘Are you motivated to find alternatives to medication or surgery to deal with pain?’ Many people have an underlying desire to take responsibility for their health, and this example can appeal to that sense of who they want to be. Student testimonials and your compelling story about how you came to the Alexander Technique can help your message resonate with others.

*S – stories.* Use them to teach lessons, to show concepts or examples, or to compel someone to take action. Three key points to include in your story are challenge (what has to be overcome); connection (reconnecting with life or getting along with others); and creativity (inspiring new ways of thinking). Example: in the US, a 425-pound man, Jared, lost over 200 pounds eating Subway sandwiches (Heath & Heath 2007, pp. 256–7).

*One more thing: Beware ‘the curse of knowledge’*

What is obvious to trained Alexander teachers is not obvious to everyone. Speak simply and plainly. When we write or speak about the Alexander Technique, we readily understand our-

selves. That doesn't mean the person we're communicating with is going to. Too often, I catch myself and my colleagues using jargon and taking great pains to sound knowledgeable and educated when we talk about our work. I think we are hoping to legitimise ourselves in one another's eyes. At the same time, I've seen the average person's eyes glazing over, their attention and their interest being lost. Remember: your colleagues are not going to come and study with you. Speak about how you can help someone do something better, more efficiently and skilfully, and with less pain and stress. The next time someone says, 'Oh, the Alexander Technique – That's about yoga/breathing/good posture/exercise,' say, 'Yes', talk about the connections, and then describe what's different and unique – *in simple terms*. What do our students want and care about? (Heath & Heath 2007, p. 246.) Answer that.

As a group, we listed the pros and cons of tipping. All of us there were generally inclined to be in favour of having the Alexander Technique tip. I felt it was important that we acknowledge the legitimate concerns some Alexander teachers might have about the negative impact it could have on the quality of teaching were the Alexander Technique to tip. Those concerns can be addressed so more teachers might focus on taking the actions that will contribute to the tip.

### *Pros and cons*

#### Pros:

- Make a living teaching full-time.
- Demand could raise the quality of practitioners.
- More and better research projects and increased funding.
- Presence in business and educational settings.
- Less strain on public health systems.
- Reduced insurance claims.
- Improve the 'use' (function and effectiveness) of companies, communications and society.

Cons:

- Diluted: awareness, inhibition, direction and non-doing will not be at the core of what's taught.
- The quality of teacher training may be compromised.
- Not enough teachers to meet the demand.
- Hybrid training programs, less oversight on standards.
- More government oversight of our practice.
- Misrepresent or change what Alexander Technique is, or mix it with other disciplines.

**PART II WHAT IS THE 20% THAT WOULD TIP THE ALEXANDER  
TECHNIQUE?**

In thinking about the 20% of actions which yield 80% of results, I believe that developing a strong professional identity among all teachers would have a huge impact on the mainstream success of the Alexander Technique. By a strong professional identity, I mean having a sense of legitimacy, a belief in the unique value in our expertise and in the Alexander Technique, pride in our work, self-respect, and attention to the quality and clarity of our appearance, our communications and our presentation to the world at large.

The Alexander Technique is failing to develop a strong professional identity. Many individual teachers are highly successful, some with full practices, some with teaching appointments, some serving specialised populations, some working as part of a team in the arts, medical or business worlds. They remain exceptions and not the rule. At my Congress presentation, the group acknowledged feeling a lack of support and endorsement from many of the teachers who trained us. The message we heard, whether it was explicit or implicit, was that on the one hand, we should not endgain to build a practice; on the other, if we are not teaching full time, we will never have a successful practice or be truly skilful teachers.

During an open forum in Lugano entitled 'Raising Questions', the topic of teacher training was on the floor. A member of our profession – one with over 40 years of experience teaching, training teachers and offering postgraduate work to

colleagues around the world – said that graduates of training courses should keep jobs to earn money, not try to have a self-supporting practice, and be grateful to work on themselves. What kind of message is this?

I have taken post-certification work with more than one colleague who openly criticised my training course or my skills, and I have heard similar tales from many colleagues.

If, within our profession, we cannot encourage one another to take pride in our work, then how will we develop a strong professional identity in the world?

*Is your Alexander teacher teaching you the ‘real’ Alexander Technique?*  
We are expending enormous energy, time and resources focusing on training standards, when we could be pooling our personal, organisational and financial resources in order to develop effective marketing strategies and a strong professional identity.

The current failure of the Alexander Technique profession is not about training standards, pedagogical methods, or teaching styles. These issues are long-standing, and they distract us from moving forward.

In his article (atcongress.com 4), Michael Frederick writes:

When beginning my teacher training in London with Walter and Dilys Carrington, I was young and naive. I assumed that the Alexander Technique, and the principles embodied therein, would lead to a whole and cooperative Alexander community, exempting it from the usual downward spirals and degeneration that occur in other organizations.

I was rudely awakened upon attending my first ‘London party’ for teacher trainees in 1975. The Macdonald group stood in one corner of the room and the Carrington camp in the other – very few Barlow trainees even attended – the Peter Scott students seemed the most amiable, mingling about the room, but were on the ‘fringe of London acceptability.’ The only thing we could all seem to agree upon was a sense of being better than

any Alexander teacher trained in America! (Especially by that woman in Nebraska.)

In those days, as far as direct communication among various factions was concerned, there was – at best – an acceptance of ‘agreeing to disagree.’ If a common ground was not found, it was easy to see the Alexander world atrophying into a quaint Edwardian approach to psychophysical education.

The American Society for the Alexander Technique (AmSAT) was formed in 1987 and its primary focus has been on codifying training standards and overseeing training programs. If we take the 80/20 rule to heart, our decision to devote our energies to this area has not created the momentum the Alexander Technique needs if it is to gain a wide audience in the United States. Ultimately, we will need standards and protocols showing that we have checks and balances assuring that the public is protected, but those efforts are purposeless if we have no presence in the marketplace.

The members of AmSAT consistently say they want their professional organisation to focus on efforts that will generate more students in private practices. Many members and former members have said that they don’t feel they get enough in return for their dues. Perhaps it is time to redirect where all our professional organisations put their primary resources.

*Everyone has a piece of the elephant*

Can we learn to let go of our focus on whose way of training and teaching is the ‘right’ way, and instead learn to understand and articulate what each of these styles offers? If so, then we can help private students and those pursuing teacher-training to assess which approach is most effective for her or him, and the public will perceive the Technique as having credibility and value. Good word of mouth is the fastest way to increase our presence in the market place.

Pilates can be taught in groups or one-on-one, with or without special equipment. There are many styles of yoga, taught in groups and individually, which suit different students in differ-

ent ways. Yoga and Pilates have made it into the mainstream, and people are paying to study them.

There was some talk at the Congress during the open forum 'Raising Questions' about whether having multiple professional societies with different training standards is hurting the profession. I don't believe it makes any difference. I prefer the standards under which I was trained because they suit me constitutionally with respect to my mental, physical and emotional make-up. I accept the fact that there are many ways to train, teach, and study the Alexander Technique. Some styles of teaching focus more on inhibition, some focus more on movement, and some focus more on our thinking process as a way to change our habits and use. Forms can include chair work, activity based work, group instruction, hands-on, no hands-on, verbal instruction, no talking, or table work. There are many subtleties and variations to style and form. I have come to understand my preference for what I consider a more classical hands-on based approach, whether I am in the role of student (I still take lessons), teacher or teacher-trainer. Knowing what form and style most appeals to me and plays to my strengths has helped me to build my practice. When teachers teach and students study the form and style that resonates with them, there will be more success.

### *How to empower the profession*

I count myself fortunate to have been trained in a culture where I was empowered to find my own voice as a teacher of the Alexander Technique. Not only was I trained by a large faculty, I worked with visiting teachers from around the world while I trained. I developed a fluency in the principles of the work, and understand its many dialects.

From what I've observed, some teachers, after they have entered the profession, do not make or are not taught a clear distinction between the unconditional support they received when students and teacher-trainees, and the sense of boundaries and business practices that make for a strong professional.

The transition from having a space of unconditional support held for us as the student, to having the responsibility to hold it for another when we become the teacher is not an automatic shift. Rather, it requires that we empower ourselves. The characteristics of a successful Alexander professional are not the characteristics of a student. The change requires that we take the consistent attention to use of self that we apply to our teaching skills and use that attention in every aspect of our professional practices. How we speak, how we dress, how we manage our appointment books, how we interact with colleagues and how we interact with professionals from other fields – all of these require the same attention.

At the American Center for the Alexander Technique (ACAT), when I was in training, I taught over 60 lessons under supervision, put hands on my trainers and received verbal feedback and was given a course on building a practice – and I graduated knowing I could teach. I also knew I would enjoy a lifetime of study, growing and gaining skill on all levels.

I have never met an Alexander teacher who was not committed to excellence, and I encourage each of us to apply the same methodology to creating our individual professional identity that we do to refining and enhancing our teaching skills. For those in our profession who already have a powerful sense of professional identity, I urge you to help your colleagues to develop theirs.

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*Recommended Reading*

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- Schapera, V. 2001 *How to Establish and Maintain and Strong Client Base*. FourWinds Press: Cincinnati.

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