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From habit to awareness: inhibition in the alexander technique as embodied metacognitive monitoring in musical theatre performer training

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Abstract. A musical theatre performer may be singing, moving, acting, and managing attention and emotional engagement at the same time. Familiar effort can appear quickly when these demands come together. The breath may become restricted, or the jaw and neck may tighten before the performer notices. Technical control may begin to take over the performance. This paper examines inhibition in the Alexander Technique in relation to metacognitive monitoring within this training context. Before trying to correct a response, the performer needs an opportunity to notice it. Metacognitive monitoring involves noticing and evaluating a process as it unfolds. Inhibition may allow a brief pause before the performer continues with a familiar response. This does not immediately produce a better action, nor is it presented here as a complete model of self-regulation. Its initial value is more basic: the performer has an opportunity to notice what is already happening and consider whether that response is useful for the task. From this perspective, the paper considers how the relationship between inhibition and monitoring may inform musical theatre pedagogy. Guided questions, brief pauses, and short periods of reflection may help students become more aware of the connection between a stimulus and a habitual response. Inhibition is discussed here as one possible way of understanding embodied metacognitive monitoring within integrated performance training.

Keywords: alexander technique, inhibition, metacognition, monitoring, musical theatre, performer training

1. Introduction

The Alexander Technique is a form of psychophysical education developed by F. M. Alexander. One of its central concerns is habitual response. Alexander used inhibition to describe the decision not to follow a familiar response to a stimulus at once [1]. The performer is not asked to restrict movement, become passive, or remove all effort. A response can be noticed without being followed straight away.

A student may sing a phrase freely in a voice lesson, then find it harder when choreography is added. Another student may understand the dramatic intention in an acting class but become more fixed in the body when thinking about pitch, breath, or movement accuracy. Musical theatre training often teaches these disciplines in separate lessons. The performer has to bring them together in rehearsal and performance, which is where inhibition may be relevant.

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A performer can have the artistic understanding and technical skill yet still encounter these familiar difficulties. Sometimes a response to pressure, anticipation, or a demanding task begins before the result can be heard or seen. By then, the performer may already be following it.

The student may only be able to say that the phrase suddenly feels much harder, while the teacher can see that something has changed. "Relax", "More support", or "Don't force it" may help for a moment. However, these instructions do not necessarily help the student identify when the extra effort began. The concern here is whether a performer can notice the response taking shape before it has affected the performance.

A performer may feel a shift in balance or find that singing has lost its ease. There may be a sense of beginning to push, without yet having the words to describe it. Narrowed attention, a held breath, or muscular effort beyond what the task seems to require can also become noticeable. Flavell's account of knowledge of one's own cognitive processes and the monitoring of those processes offers a way to understand this awareness [2].

The performer is still singing, moving, and responding dramatically while this happens. There is no time to think through every change. Gallagher's account of embodied cognition helps here: thinking depends on the body, and perception, movement, and action shape how a task is understood and answered [3]. Monitoring in performer training needs to be considered alongside this bodily experience and remain connected to action.

Sokol-Hessner et al. found that actors demonstrated greater metacognitive insight into interoceptive accuracy than non-actors, despite comparable interoceptive accuracy [4]. Feeling more, or noticing more, does not necessarily mean judging the information accurately. A performer still needs to consider what a response means for the task, not only what can be felt.

A performer may become less responsive while trying to check breathing, posture, voice, movement, and emotion all at once. Self-monitoring can become excessive. Here, monitoring means noticing a familiar response as it begins to interfere with the task. It does not require the performer to keep every part of the body under inspection.

This paper asks: How can inhibition in the Alexander Technique be understood as embodied metacognitive monitoring in musical theatre performer training? The discussion focuses on the moment when a habitual response can be noticed before the performer follows it, and considers what that awareness offers to teaching, rehearsal, and performance. This is a conceptual argument with a limited scope. Inhibition does not prescribe a replacement action or provide a complete theory of self-regulation.

2. Metacognitive monitoring in performer training

Metacognition is usually understood as knowledge of and thinking about one's own cognitive processes. Flavell includes both knowledge about cognition and the monitoring of experience as it unfolds [2]. Monitoring matters because a student cannot reconsider a strategy that remains unnoticed. A student might notice that an action differs from what was intended. The student may also recognise that something happened or judge whether a way of working helped. These are useful ways of describing monitoring, rather than separate stages that every performer must follow. Recent work with beginner and expert musicians has also found metacognitive monitoring and evaluation within the preparation of repertoire for performance [5].

In performer training, this awareness may begin through bodily experience. An actor may notice a change in breathing, a small shift in balance, or a movement that feels more restricted. The actor may recognise that something has changed before being able to name it. Gallagher's discussion of embodiment helps explain why this experience is not simply extra information added to an otherwise mental process [3]. The performer

perceives and acts through the body. A change in how the action is organised may therefore become part of how the performer understands what is happening, even while the task continues.

However, feeling and judgment need to be distinguished. Sokol-Hessner et al. found a difference in actors' metacognitive insight without a corresponding advantage in interoceptive accuracy [4]. Their study does not establish how inhibition works in musical theatre training. It does, however, provide a reason to distinguish sensation from the judgment of sensation. A performer may feel something strongly and still be uncertain about what it means. For example, a performer may feel that the effort involved in an emotionally demanding musical number is necessary. Does it support the dramatic task, or does it make singing and movement harder? The feeling alone does not settle that question.

A student may be thinking about the breath, where the voice should go, the next step, and the emotion of the scene. Internal checking can interrupt the life of the performance. Yet a familiar response can also go unnoticed when the student pays too little attention to it. A brief observation may be enough: tightness in the jaw before a high note, perhaps, or a held breath as the choreography changes tempo. The performer does not need to inspect or correct everything at once. The response can become noticeable while attention remains connected to the task.

A student may need help learning what to notice. Teachers cannot assume that this is already clear. "Relax", "Be yourself", or "Support your voice" tell the student something about the desired result, but may give little help with recognising what is happening along the way. A change made with the teacher's guidance may not last into the next rehearsal if the student cannot recognise when the familiar response returns. Once monitoring becomes part of learning, the teacher can ask a different question: what did the student notice, and when? The student's observations can then help the teacher and student decide where to continue the work.

3. Inhibition in the alexander technique

Inhibition is central to the Alexander Technique, yet the word can be misleading. In everyday usage, "inhibition" may suggest self-restraint, suppression, or holding behaviour in check. Alexander used the term to describe not immediately yielding to a habitual response to a stimulus [1]. His investigation began with recurring difficulties in speaking. He observed that preparing to speak involved a familiar pattern in the head, neck, larynx, and trunk. Because this effort was familiar, it seemed to be the correct way to proceed, even though it interfered with his aim. Trying harder brought him back to the same organisation. He needed to refrain from going straight into that response for change to become possible [1].

A singer may lift the chest before a difficult pitch and feel that this is needed to "support" the note. A performer may brace the shoulders before an emotionally expressive entrance because it feels like preparation for the effort. Neither may recognise this as a habit. It can feel necessary. A teacher may notice these behaviours and ask the student not to lift the chest or brace the shoulders. The student may still respond to the task in the familiar way, and the pattern may return in another form. With inhibition, attention is directed back to the point at which that response first begins.

The performer still intends to act. The text, movement, or musical phrase remains available during this brief pause; there is no need to freeze. What the performer does not follow straight away is the first familiar way of achieving the objective. A short delay may make urgency or a held breath easier to notice. Narrowed focus, excessive muscular effort, or an expressive shape decided in advance may also become clearer. The performer need not have a complete alternative ready. At this point, the concern is what the stimulus is already calling forth.

Klein et al. reviewed controlled trials of the Alexander Technique with musicians [6]. They found some evidence of benefit for performance anxiety, but evidence for other outcomes remained inconclusive. Cacciatore et al. reviewed potential mechanisms involving postural regulation, sensory experience, and habitual motor responses [7]. More recent research has also examined how Alexander Technique lessons relate to pianists' posture during performance, although this work does not address inhibition as metacognitive monitoring [8].

These papers provide context for questions about effort and coordination, including how performers organise action beyond maintaining a posture. Neither establishes inhibition as metacognitive monitoring. That interpretation is proposed here conceptually, rather than reported as an empirical finding from those studies.

4. Inhibition as embodied metacognitive monitoring

A performer might notice, "Whenever I try to sing that note, I hold my jaw very tightly". Another observation might be, "I hold my breath when the scene becomes intense", or "Before this dance phrase, I rush before I find my balance". Each observation invites an immediate correction, such as freeing the jaw, letting the breath go, or slowing the preparation. Before correcting anything, though, the performer has something to evaluate. These observations concern how the action begins and is organised, rather than how it finally looks or sounds. Inhibition may allow this familiar response to enter awareness as the action is beginning.

A performer faced with a difficulty may want to correct it or try harder straight away. Noticing what is happening is a different part of the work. Stimulus, habitual tendency, awareness, pause, evaluation, and retained choice are useful terms for describing how a stimulus and a response relate, although the performer may notice only part of it. These are not six fixed stages. They need not appear separately, and their boundaries may be blurred. With inhibition, a new, earlier question arises: does this initial response need to be continued?

Inhibition lies close to monitoring in the moment, while reflection after performance may help the performer understand what was noticed. The focus is the response that appears as the intention to act translates into action. However, inhibition should not be taken as a complete account of metacognitive regulation. Monitoring may bring a habitual response to light and help the performer judge its usefulness. After this monitoring, the performer may need to redirect attention, change the task, seek outside help, or learn a different coordination. These belong to later regulation. Recent research on musicians' self-regulation similarly places monitoring within a wider process that also includes attention, strategy use, and self-evaluation [9].

The pause supplies no instruction about which to choose. It allows the performer to notice and evaluate before making that further choice.

The performer may briefly notice unnecessary effort, then return attention to the music, fellow performers, the space, or the dramatic intention. Inhibition is considered here in relation to a meaningful stimulus and a recognisable tendency. It does not require inspecting every body part, or constant technical checking that displaces the artistic task. Checking of that kind becomes over-monitoring. An unrelenting search for faults may interfere with the responsiveness that training is meant to support.

In a hypothetical integrated rehearsal, a student compresses the neck and jaw while preparing to hold a note during a turn. The teacher might simplify the movement, work on sustaining the note, or draw attention to the jaw. Any of these approaches may help. The teacher could also ask when the compression starts and what seems to call it forth. The student might then notice it while anticipating the turn, before the note itself. Inhibition brings attention to that timing. The issue is then more than a body part that needs correction. It is a familiar preparation that may become recognisable before it is repeated.

Teachers are still needed, because the student may find a familiar response difficult to notice from inside. Alexander Technique teaching may include verbal and hands-on guidance, and outside observation remains part of the work. With that help, the student may learn to recognise when a familiar reaction begins and ask whether the task needs it. The teacher may then have less need to point out the same response each time. Asking whether the task needs the response can be useful in singing, movement, and acting, while each discipline retains its own technical demands.

5. Pedagogical implications for musical theatre

"Relax" may tell a student what the teacher wants, but "What happened just before the breath became restricted?" gives the student something to investigate. A teacher might ask, "When did you notice the extra effort: with the movement, the note, or the anticipation of being evaluated?" Understanding inhibition as monitoring allows the teacher to begin here, before prescribing a different action. One well-timed question may help the student notice the connection between the stimulus and the response. Rehearsal need not become an interrogation; attention still needs to stay with the artistic task.

Before repeating a difficult passage, the student may already feel an impulse to prepare in a familiar way. A small pause can allow that impulse to become noticeable before it carries over into the next attempt. The pause may last no more than a breath, without breaking the momentum of rehearsal. It is more than stopping after something has failed. The student is attending to how the next action begins, as well as trying to achieve the desired result. The correct coordination still has to be learned; the pause does not supply it.

After rehearsal, a student might make a brief note about what became noticeable. What was the stimulus? When did the familiar tendency appear, and did anything change when it was not immediately continued? Such notes may help the student notice relationships across tasks. For example, breathing might become more restricted when moving from acting into singing than during singing alone. The student and teacher would then have a more specific starting point for further work. This remains something to explore, not proof of a single cause. The notes need not become a diary of correct and incorrect sensations.

Performance takes effort, sometimes considerable effort. A teacher should not ask every performer to reach one supposedly correct sensory state or make all tension disappear. The student may need help distinguishing effort required by the task from effort that arrives automatically. Inhibition may support that distinction, but the demands of the task remain. Does this response serve the task, and does the performer have some choice about continuing it? The teacher also needs to work within their competence. Specialised hands-on Alexander Technique teaching should be provided by appropriately trained teachers.

A student bringing singing, dancing, and acting together may rush the preparation, hold the breath, or follow a fixed idea of how the phrase must go. Teachers can help the student notice these responses when the demands of the different disciplines converge. Integration need not require three separate lists of instructions to be held in mind throughout. Each discipline still needs its own technique. Alongside this technical work, inhibition may allow a pause before the student reinforces an automatic preparation, with the performance intention still available. Although this does not guarantee technical accuracy, it may foster conditions that are more conducive to learning.

6. Conclusion

A performer may feel that a familiar preparation is the only way to begin. Inhibition may allow it to become noticeable as a response that can be questioned. The performer can notice how the action is beginning and evaluate it before deciding what to do next. This is the sense in which inhibition can be read as embodied

metacognitive monitoring in musical theatre training. Not immediately continuing the habitual response may give monitoring a practical form.

Technical and expressive demands can converge quickly under pressure. Familiar effort may already be shaping the action before the performer realises it. Inhibition may make that response noticeable while some possibility of choice remains. Its contribution comes at this earlier moment. It is not a matter of freezing or stopping all action, and it does not supply a replacement coordination. Nor does it provide a complete theory of self-regulation or resolve every difficulty of integration in musical theatre training.

A teacher can attend to what the student notices as well as to what needs correction. A specific question, a pause before repetition, or a brief reflective note may help the student trace the connection between a stimulus and a habitual response. These modest practices still depend on skilled observation and do not replace voice, movement, or acting technique. How performers learn this capacity in rehearsal needs further empirical study, as does its relationship with attention, performance anxiety, and work across the three disciplines. The conceptual proposal here concerns the movement from habit to awareness: a performer may begin to recognise what is happening before simply continuing with the habitual response.

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