

Playing with Principles

by Sydney Laurel Harris and Kathryn Miranda

Working together for several years on the serious business of AmSAT, we needed a break, a change of direction: We needed to have fun! But the Alexander Technique is a SERIOUS BUSINESS—a deeply engaging, ultimately profound psychophysical learning process. What does *play* have to do with it? Or rather, what *can* play have to do with it?

We have been taught in our culture that nothing of value is accomplished if you just play. You must not be learning if you are having fun. But actually, when the energetic and creative energy of play is part of the learning process, you learn as you are having fun and the learning process is enhanced. Physicists F. David Peat and the late David Bohm describe the relationship between play and creativity in this way:

New thoughts generally arise with a play of the mind, and the failure to appreciate this is actually one of the major blocks to creativity. Thought is generally considered to be a sober and weighty business. But here it is being suggested that creative play is an essential element in forming new hypotheses and ideas.... Play, it appears, is the very essence of thought.... Within the act of creative play, fresh perceptions occur which enable a person to propose a new idea that can be put forward for exploration.¹

Thus “Playing with Principles” was born. At the 2014 and 2015 ACGMs, we presented workshops that engaged small groups of teachers and trainees in an exploration of learning through play. In these workshops, we experienced firsthand that playfulness offers a valuable and profound way to lighten up the serious nature of sticking with the principles.

Serious Business

We are all familiar with the experience of trying too hard: We can be so serious that we get in our own way. We can become robotic in our movements and fixed in our thinking when we try too hard to follow the teacher’s orders or mimic the teacher’s words and movements. We can get stuck by trying to bring about predetermined results, feelings, or positions.

We found a way to address this kind of self-created end-gaining interference indirectly through open-ended play, which provides an enjoyable antidote to these difficulties and a

legitimate method for practicing the principles of the Alexander Technique.

Our experiences inspired us to look at academic research on play to see how it relates to learning. It turns out that play is an innate part of normal development in all animals, especially human beings. Play helps children learn about social give-and-take, develop impulse control, practice problem solving, and learn to be adaptable to changing conditions.

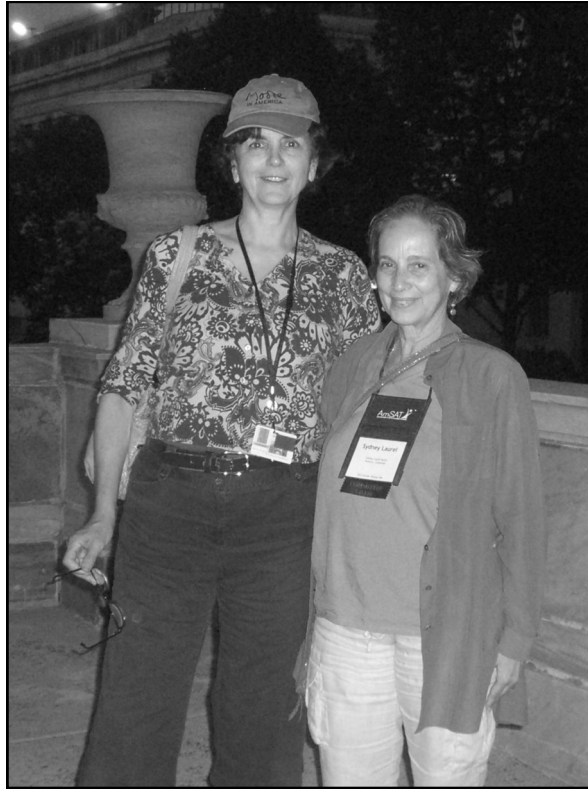
“Play is more about process than content. At its best, play is self-directed and guided by fluid rules agreed to by all participants. But whether it is raucous or quiet, physical or mental, social or solitary, the act of playing seems to open the brain to possibilities.”²

What Does Academia Say about Play?

In 1961, Roger Caillois, a French intellectual, wrote *Man, Play and Games*, which identified many different types of play: competition, chance, simulation, disciplined pursuit of solutions, unrestricted improvisation, and gratuitously difficult puzzles. Caillois defined play as an activity that is:

1. **Free:** in which playing is not obligatory; if it were, it would at once lose its attractive and joyous quality as a diversion;
2. **Separate:** circumscribed within limits of space and time, defined and fixed in advance;
3. **Uncertain:** the course of which cannot be determined, nor the result attained beforehand, and some latitude for innovations being left to the player’s initiative;
4. **Unproductive:** creating neither goods, nor wealth, nor new elements of any kind; and except for the exchange of property among the players, ending in a situation identical to that prevailing at the beginning of the game;
5. **Governed by rules:** under conventions that suspend ordinary laws, and for the moment establish new legislation, which alone counts;
6. **Make-believe:** accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or a free unreality, as against real life.³

In his book *The Ambiguity of Play*, Brian Sutton-Smith looks at the diverse nature of play activities and finds a thread of commonality: “Clearly the primary motive of players is the stylized performance of existential themes that mimic or mock the uncertainties and risks of survival and, in so doing, engage



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the propensities of mind, body, and cell in exciting forms of arousal.”⁴

Play prepares us for the ambiguities and variability of life *and* gives us pleasure in the process. We are in good company by engaging and promoting play.

Stuart Brown, MD, the founder of the National Institute for Play, often begins working with people by taking a play history, and one of the first questions he asks is “When have you felt free to do and be what you choose?” In other words, when were you happy? Happiness is the essence of play. Laughter is an extension of play, and studies show many health benefits of laughter and play, including: longevity, reduction in risk for dementia and neurological problems, reduction in depression, reduction in heart disease, decreased stress, and improved relationships.⁵ So, play is not only fun, it is good for you!

The Principles Are Compatible with Play

Using play in teaching the Technique seems like a natural partnership to us, because both play and Alexander principles have so many aspects in common. For example, preventing habitual reactions to stimuli is an essential principle of the Technique, and it is also an essential element in most play, for improvised play is not predetermined. In other words, we do not know how the game will play out. When end-gaining is not a factor, opportunities for surprise, discovery, and joy are created.

Like the Alexander Technique, play is process-oriented, leading us to stay aware and engaged in the present, moment by moment. They both have the capacity to leave us energized with a feeling of lightness and ease and pleasure.

It’s not what you know but how you engage in the activity, how you face the unknown, how you approach challenges that matters; and the results of a playful attitude can be unexpected, often surprising, and revealing.

Play requires freedom and choice. Hmmmm, gee, what does that remind us of? The choices we make while playing reveal a lot about our way of being in the world. We learn about ourselves from the way we play.

Why and When Would You Want to Use Play in Your Teaching of the Alexander Technique?

Theater programs have long used improvised play and theater games to teach actors about authenticity and spontaneity. Games and improvised play stimulate curiosity, participation, and involvement and can lead to discovery of something new. Establishing a safe and non-judgmental environment allows players to explore more freely. Utilizing Alexander Technique principles in playing theater games can deepen the experience, for when habitual reactions are inhibited (when the actor rejects the usual “schtick”) and muscular energy is released into improved patterns of balance and ease, then the actor is open to the possibility of spontaneity and authenticity that comes about when you really don’t know what will happen next.

This is true in games of skill as well as theater games. For example, in the simple example of “Red Light, Green Light,” when a player stops end-gaining to respond quickly without regard for the moment-to-moment process, she can take the

time to listen carefully and become more skilled at the game—in addition to having more fun.

A simple change in use (such as using a *monkey* or allowing the neck to be free) can ultimately affect both process and outcome for participants in a challenging game of skill. This may lead them to a new perspective on the Alexander principles derived from experiential learning. Any kind of ball play will lead to interesting examples. For instance, in playing the game “Juggling” in a group, ask the participants to stand in a circle, each holding a ball. One by one, each person throws a ball to another person, who then throws it to someone else. The game begins with one ball in play and gradually more balls are added until all are in play at the same time. In the beginning, there can be a lot of anxiety about keeping track of where the balls are going and coming from, about dropping the balls, about looking stupid. However, when focus shifts from the end-gaining of catching and throwing successfully to using oneself well, players tend to become more coordinated, better able to keep track of what is going on, and, ultimately, more successful at catching and throwing when there are multiple balls in the game.

Another example is any kind of target practice. In this easy game, each person takes four pieces of paper, makes paper balls with three pieces, draws a big circle on the fourth, tapes it to the wall for a target, and then throws the balls, trying to hit the target. End-gaining and mind-wandering often surface. Interesting options for thinking about use include: thinking up while aiming forward and awareness of diagonal relationships in the use of the whole (e.g., the role the left foot plays in throwing with the right arm).

Play is also useful when a student is overthinking and so invested in “getting it right” that he or she fears “getting it wrong.” Start small, try a game with few rules, like keeping eyes on a ball rolling on the floor, while sitting and standing, to break the mood and change the student’s attitude. A little fun goes a long way!

Students come to lessons with different learning skills, personal perceptual preferences (e.g., conceptual, auditory, visual, kinesthetic), varying degrees of tolerance for routine, and attentional proficiencies and deficiencies. The art of teaching includes the ability to utilize the wealth of our personal experiences and knowledge of the Technique to engage each student in a unique “sandbox” tailored to each individual.

Some pedagogical approaches present a prescribed set of instructions for putting hands on the student in a set way in set places, saying the same words repetitively, all in the same order. Students learn the principles and improve their use through this pedagogical style, or teachers would not use it.

However, we believe that it is more empowering for students to own their own learning process, and we do this by encouraging students

in a process of self-discovery. We expanded this approach in the group situation of our ACGM workshops by cultivating a playful atmosphere, so that the participating teachers and trainees could freely play with principles in hopes that this experience would widen the range of pedagogical styles they are comfortable employing in lessons and classes.

“The choices we make while playing reveal a lot about our way of being in the world.”

The effectiveness of play in opening up channels for learning—and the need for play as part of normal development—is wired into the human brain, but getting adults back to this open state takes practice. We hoped that running workshops that encouraged playing with the principles would initiate an eye-opening and open-ended journey for the participants.

Using Our Personal Play History to Plan Workshops

Drawing on our own memories, we began thinking about what kind of play would be appropriate for an ACGM teacher/trainee workshop. We looked back at our personal play history and remembered many happy moments: Sydney loved improvised imaginary play with dolls of all kinds—paper dolls, Madame Alexander dolls, baby dolls, Cowboy Bob, Barbie and Ken—as well as social play at school such as hopscotch and jump rope. Later she enjoyed drawing, reading, and crossword puzzles. She disliked competitive sports, which triggered anxiety. Today she particularly treasures unscheduled time. For Sydney, encountering new people, new places, new cultures, without the pressure of being seen in a particular way, engenders excitement and novelty, important elements of play.

Kathy remembers the joy of moving: improvised playing on swings, rolling downhill, skating, running from *it*, and dancing. She loved learning and varying the rules of board games, card games, party games, puzzles, and word games. Her happiest moments included a sense of safety, freedom from ridicule, novelty, and a sense of other players' complicity and willingness to suspend any past or future agenda—to let the present be all.

For our first workshop, we decided to focus on social games with some structure to begin with and to allow participants to improvise and change the rules as they went along (Kathy's love of varying the rules influenced our approach). Our happy memories helped us think about creating an atmosphere that would feel unpressured, safe, and encouraging of playfulness.

Our First Workshop

During our first workshop, at the 2014 ACGM, we asked participants to look for specific principles during the experience of playing games. The primary goal was to explore and discover different ways of demonstrating the principles.

First, the group discussed definitions and qualities of play and agreed that play is not serious and not work, but is joyful and has an unknown outcome; and the group agreed that players have presence, flow, creativity, focus, quiet attentiveness, and permission to stop or rest. Let the games begin!

We provided examples of games that introduce Alexander Technique principles such as inhibition and direction. We

progressed to asking participants to create their own games. In keeping with the voluntary aspect of play, we asked each group of three participants to decide which principle (end-gaining, direction, awareness, inhibition, primary control, or observation) they wanted to explore in creating games. In the second half of the workshop, the participants spontaneously chose to play without a principle in mind to discover what principles might emerge.

Participants chose from toys and props: balloons, sponge balls, tennis balls, pool noodles, and piles of *National Geographic* magazines. One group used pool noodles to explore the balance of opposition, going into squats with one person at either end of the pool noodle. Then they made the game more complicated by using two noodles and three people!

Mara Sokolsky reported on the workshop in *AmSAT Journal* and wrote, "We got to explore how elements of play can make those tenets [Alexander principles] come to life in an imaginative, indirect, but highly impressionable fashion."⁶

When participants created games without designing them around a particular principle, multiple Alexander Technique principles emerged within each game—the contrast of end-gaining vs. not end-gaining, using direction vs. not using direction, the effect of inhibition—and all resulted in heightened awareness and observation.

At the end of the workshop, one of the participants said that he had had no idea that he was going to be creating the games—which turned out to be a very pleasant surprise for him. The participants learned a great deal about themselves in relationship to play and to look at the Alexander principles with fresh eyes.

In order for participants to be willing to play, they must let go of self-consciousness and feel safe working with new people. This takes time. In 2014, there were six participants in a three-hour workshop. The small number of people and the lack of time pressure allowed the group to move organically into playing and experimenting. The 2014 workshop met our personal need for playing with each other, and it sparked our desire to delve more deeply, and more consciously, into play.

The Theme of the 2015 ACGM Workshop was Health and Happiness

Play was in the air at the 2015 ACGM. The Board organized Friday morning's session around community building. There was a playful approach to defining community that included a word game on qualities of community, whispered *ahs*, and joining hands pair-by-pair and group-by-group until we were one big circle of joined hands. Our community has its share of conflicts and complex inter-relationships. It gave us hope to see so many of us wishing to



Aik Hooi Lee and Jonathan Ponder play a game of catch at the 2015 ACGM.

bring more play into our time together, helping us move forward with kindness and creativity.

In 2015, we had 18 participants and two hours, and we decided to add more structure to create a sense of safety and to accommodate individual needs for quiet play, active play, rowdy play, and so forth. Stuart Brown finds that a powerful first step to re-engage people with play is to have them inventory their play history.⁷ We began the workshop with a contemplative exercise combining active rest with reflection on the participants' individual play histories. This exercise inspired a vast compilation of the definitions, elements, and individual variations of play and helped to bring the group together.

We presented the first game, a variation of "Rock, Paper, Scissors" to groups of three, but we used "up, wide, and forward" instead of "rock, paper, scissors" to make the game more Alexander-relevant. The groups had the autonomy to select a movement or gesture to signify each of these directions and to decide whether or not to keep score and how to change the rules if the game got boring. We had never tried this game in a group before, and we were curious to see how it would work. The groups had a grand time for sure, making silly moves and laughing heartily when all three made the same choice. This game seemed to be a good icebreaker, putting everyone on an equal footing of vulnerability and creating a sense of safety, which allowed the players to feel comfortable while daring to be wrong.

The next game focused on manual sensitivity and, yes, inanity. We divided the group into partners to play a version of "tug-of-war" with toilet paper. The challenge was to pull the toilet paper away from your partner without tearing the paper. We also offered big rolls of paper towels to create variety and options in developing the game so that it would be fun. Some participants were very interested in the texture, strength, and flexibility of the paper and their relation to it through touch and pressure. Some were competitive and determined to win. Some discovered a connection to their play history and noted how much they had evolved since childhood, even though they still had similar preferences.

In both games, we gave instructions to break and change rules as the game progressed, and we asked participants to note if any of the Alexander principles emerged or enhanced aspects of play. Participants' responses included end-gaining, expanded field of awareness, permission to not know, permission to experiment, and a sense of kinesthetic lightness.

During the third segment of the workshop, participants invented games using a variety of props and toys. One group of three invented a challenging game of catch with the catcher restrained by a jump rope looped around the waist and held by another player who moved the rope to prevent the catcher from catching the ball. A group of four used small balls to create a balance beam to walk across. There were so many ways to have fun, create challenges, and be silly. For us the success of the workshop was revealed by the smiles, the creativity, the joy of exchanging ideas and what-ifs, and the enjoyment of out-of-the-ordinary physical challenge. Because processing time is very important, future workshops will include more ways to process the experiences and facilitate reflection, observation, and possibilities for further exploration.

Future of Playing with Principles

In his book *A Playful Path*, Bernard De Koven, game designer, author, lecturer, and fun theorist, recommends that adults develop a playfulness practice:

*There are many good reasons to be playful, and many equally good reasons why you generally don't. Which explains why it's called 'practice.' So, here's what you might need to remember: 1) you can almost always choose to be playful, 2) you're almost always allowed to be playful, 3) and in all likelihood, you'll be glad, and so will the people with whom you are playing.*⁸

We will keep practicing playfulness and looking for opportunities to share our playful practice with colleagues. In future workshops, we plan to continue combining Alexander principles with the purposeless nature of good play. It's not as purposeless as it seems, because playing engages our whole selves and also triggers our habits of mind and body, thus providing a convenient and fun way to address those habits while remaining alert to the present moment, being spontaneous and open to whatever occurs, and having a good time!

Endnotes

1. David Bohm and F. David Peat, *Science, Order and Creativity* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987).
2. Jake Miller, "Flights of Fancy," *Harvard Medicine* (Winter/Spring 2014). www.hms.harvard.edu/news/harvard-medicine/harvard-medicine/play/flights-fancy.
3. Roger Callois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1961), 9–10.
4. Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 231.
5. See studies cited in Stuart Brown and Christopher Vaughan, *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul* (New York: Penguin, 2009).
6. Mara Sokolsky, "Playing with Principles," *AmSAT Journal*, No. 6 (Fall 2014), 34.
7. Brown and Vaughn, op. cit.
8. Bernard De Koven, *Playful Path* (Pittsburgh, PA: ETC Press, 2014), 45. www.aplayfulpath.com.

Sydney Laurel Harris certified to teach with Frank Ottiwell and Giora Pinkas (ATI-SF, 1977), and she has also studied with Marjorie Barstow, Patrick Macdonald, and Walter and Dilys Carrington. She is a founder and co-director of the Alexander Training Institute of Los Angeles. Sydney delights in her serious/silly AmSAT partnership with Kathy Miranda.

Kathryn M. Miranda (ACAT, 1990) is Director of Alexander Technique of Syracuse, a training course that is currently on hiatus. She has enjoyed the camaraderie and professional associations she has experienced while volunteering for AmSAT in various "serious" roles, including as Chair from 2011 to 2013.

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