

INTERVIEW WITH AIMEE CHAPPELOW BADER

This is an edited translation of an interview by Jelica Nuccio on August 5, 2011. Jelica began by explaining the project (a curriculum for SSPs, and for Deaf-Blind people regarding the use of SSPs). She then introduced the purpose of this series of interviews: to gain the perspective of different Deaf-Blind (DB) people who have experiences teaching.

Aimee Chappelow Bader is on the faculty of Johnson County Community College where she teaches classes in American Sign Language. She has Usher Type I with very narrow tunnel vision.

Interviewer: So specifically, we'd like to learn from you the skills, techniques, and approaches to teaching that you use as a teacher who is deaf-blind, and how this is different from those of non-deaf-blind teachers. Secondly, we'd like to learn how teaching DB adults is different from teaching sighted/hearing adults. Finally, we'd like to ask what support system you use as a teacher who is deaf-blind. What kind of assistance do you need or use from sighted people?

Aimee Chappelow Bader: I will try to address those questions but I may not be the best person to interview. I am an experienced teacher, true, but I don't have experience teaching DB people, personally,

so I may not have enough experience or the kind of experience you're looking for. I can talk about being a good teacher in general, if that would be helpful.

The first important element that comes to mind is to be prepared so you do not waste time in class. Of course, that's true of any teacher, but it's especially true as a DB person because with bad vision it would be easy to waste time looking through materials for the next thing you want to do. It's also important to arrive early, to make sure the technology is working and so on. If the equipment is not working properly or if there is some other glitch, you'll need to go to your plan B, which takes more time.

With my vision I can't read the materials without a magnifier, so to avoid the extra time that would take by preparing my own notes ahead of time using a magic marker which I can see without a magnifier. That way I can read my notes and they help keep me on track during the lessons.

The second quality of a good teacher that I think is important, is being able to engage the students. I try to be animated. When the students are engaged they will focus on the material and this helps them forget that I'm deaf-blind. There is a stigma to being deaf-blind that has to be overcome. The first day of class the students are in a little state of shock – “a deaf-

blind teacher!?” But by engaging them, being animated and having interesting lessons, it gets them focused on the material so by the second or third day – they can forget about me being deaf-blind; we’ve established rapport.

Interviewer: Right, it can be a shock. So your list would include being well prepared, being patient with student attitudes, and predicting what glitches may occur so you have a Plan B ready. And do you think about each person and what they need?

Aimee Chappelow Bader: Yes. It’s a back-and-forth, it’s interactive. It is important to know each student.

Interviewer: Do you use an interpreter when you teach, and if so, how do you use the interpreter?

Aimee Chappelow Bader: Yes, ok – Let me explain a little more about my situation. I teach ASL at a community college. There was no job description at the college for the combination interpreter-SSP that I need. My boss understood my situation and we will eventually write up a job description for the tasks involved to work with me, but for now I have to explain it to each new interpreter assigned. I get a new interpreter each semester so I have to train each one. So this is another part of my preparation. Let me emphasize that the interpreters I use are hearing

interpreters [ASL is not their first or primary language.] The community college has a staff of interpreters for the deaf students who attend classes here. It's a very large college and they need many interpreters, which led to the establishment of an Interpreter Training Program (ITP) here as well. They are not always as fluent in American Sign Language (ASL) as we would like. My situation is unique because it is especially critical that the interpreter be fluent, so, I emphasize this to the coordinator of interpreting services. I really must have an interpreter who is fluent in ASL and specifically one who is able to understand ASL easily; that is critical. That might mean an interpreter who grew up using ASL or someone with many years of experience, not just any one of the interpreters on staff. This is so important because my classroom is a strictly ASL environment [English is not involved]. The students are not allowed to talk or use voice at all during the class and the interpreter must understand what they sign and be able to copy exactly the way the student signs it, not translate. So it is different from what the college interpreters would ordinarily do. That is the natural thing for an interpreter to do – to translate what the signer is saying, not to copy it. I make it very clear what I want – I want them to include non-manual-grammar/facial expression, everything the student

does or does not do. As the teacher I have to be able to monitor and correct their signing.

I want environmental information too, for example if a student is texting during class I need to know so I can put a stop to it. It's a general college policy anyway, but it's even more important for me to put a stop to it because it's a part of me maintaining my authority and the respect of the students. During tests, I use the interpreter to watch to prevent cheating, otherwise it might be tempting, so the interpreter's visual information keeps me informed. Other examples of visual information I want from the interpreter-SSP include letting me know when students have finished making notes and their eyes are up – ready for instruction, who has their hands raised etc. There are many bits of visual-environmental information I need, more than I can list here. On the other hand, there are times I engage a student directly, for example, if they have a question about the reading or the text, I bring my magnifying glass over to where they are sitting so I can look at the text and answer directly.

Interviewer: How do you communicate with the interpreter, do you listen tactually or do you use tracking?

Well, the college is well lit so in general I use tracking BUT last winter there was an incident that made it so

clear why it is important for me to have an interpreter who is qualified to interpret for me, who can provide me with visual information but can also communicate tactually and guide. One winter night while I was teaching all the lights went out – entirely. It was very dark and I had to communicate with the interpreter tactually and it was very awkward for her. I had to give her a crash course in signing tactually and at the same time as a teacher, my concern was that I maintain control of the class. You can imagine how I felt. So, first thing I asked if all the students were still in the room and the interpreter said “Yes.” They didn’t know what to do. I sent a volunteer out to find out what was going on. The lights were out all over the building and the student came back and said most other classes had moved into the hall, so I told the students to go ahead and do that. That way we’d be able to hear what was going on in the building, any updates. As the students were leaving the room, I had to give the interpreter another crash course in guiding me. She kept pulling her arm away from me; she didn’t know what to do or how to guide me. Eventually, the lights came back on and we returned to class. But the interpreter was still reeling from the experience, poor thing. So it’s very important for me to have an interpreter with those additional SSP skills!

I feel some pressure to not ‘make demands’, and I could teach alone, without an interpreter, but it wouldn’t be fair to the poor ASL I students either – they can barely sign, and if something like that happened again, how would they communicate with me?

Interviewer: You have explained that you do not have much experience teaching DB students but I’d like to ask about possible approaches, and techniques and your philosophy. Can you talk about that?

Aimee Chappelow Bader: I’m trying to imagine what it would be like to teach a room full of DB students. I did once with the Helen Keller National Center (HKNC) Region One representative, Beth Jordan, doing SSP training, but the group was too big. It was impossible to be at all personal in my approach, to match the varying needs of so many individual students. That was my only experience. I think if I was to do it again, I’d prefer more individualized training, and then select people to come together to form a support system.

In fact, it depends on the situation, the locale. I’m thinking of DB people here in Kansas and I’m not even sure how you could begin. Let me explain the situation here. It is not like any other city. First, Kansas City is not one city but a city divided by the state line between the states of Kansas and Missouri

so the single city is half in Kansas and half in Missouri, each with its respective government. The Kansas side is largely residential, really a bedroom community. The downtown is on the Missouri side of the state line, with public transportation and so on. On the other hand, the Deaf Community is largely on the Kansas side. The Kansas state school for the Deaf is in Olathe, a small town in Johnson County, just south of the Kansas City and so Olathe is the center of a pretty large Deaf population. But, there is no regular city bus service in Olathe or Kansas City, Kansas. Johnson County is one of the richest counties in the entire country, and no one here uses public transportation. DB people live spread-out to live near their families for support. It's a lot like it was in the old days for DB people; there is no established support system. So that's why I prefer a one-on-one approach; each person would have to develop their own individual arrangement because there is no system.

So then, thinking about teaching techniques, I'm not sure. I think that too would have to be developed on an individual basis depending on the DB person. More than that, I can't say.

Interviewer: Well, given your teaching experience and a hypothetical situation with an individual student, do

you have an opinion about using role play or actual hands-on experience as a teaching method? This would be specific to using an SSP. Do you find these the most effective teaching techniques?

Aimee Chappelow Bader: To be honest, I don't have the background to answer that question. I would think though, that for DB people to use SSPs, empowerment is the key issue. And for there to be real empowerment there would have to be a support system in place so that the learning could be applied.

But hypothetically, yes, I would train the SSPs too, at the same time. I think if they learn at the same time, and see each other's learning, the content, and the process, there would be more mutual respect. But I can't emphasize enough the importance of matching your teaching methods to the person you are teaching, their background, their needs, their personality, and aptitudes. You are familiar with the concept of a 'person centered plan', that's the approach I would use: a very individualized approach that also considers the locale where they live. You have to think what will happen after the training. The person will need on-going support.

Some of the things that would have to be individualized would be their mode of communication (whether they receive tactually, visually etc.), their

style of learning and their familiarity with the topic, in general what they bring as a student. There really is no standard way of teaching that would work well for all; it has to be individualized.

Interviewer: Let me give you a common challenge: a DB person is used to relying on a family member and prefers to continue doing that because of privacy concerns or because the family member already knows all their preferences and so on. How would you approach them?

Aimee Chappelow Bader: Ok sure. I would start with their experiences using a family member and their feelings about that. Let's say they go with their mother. A mother is often not neutral. She might try to influence the DB person, project her own opinions and priorities onto the DB person. So I would draw out their experiences and I would use my own experiences as an example. I might say "When I'd go shopping with my mother she would tend to judge my purchases and tell me what or what not to buy. For her price was always a priority but sometimes for me, it was not the most important thing."

Yes, I think role play or actually doing it, practicing using an SSP is definitely important. To be honest, I wish I had been more clear back when I was using my mother to help me. People told me it was not a good

idea, but they never expanded on it or explained it in a way I could understand until later. It's not just DB people but many hearing people too, don't really understand why it is not a good idea.

I would emphasize that if you use an SSP you can have a choice. You can go with your mom or family member sometimes and you can go with an SSP sometimes. That way you can have some time to go out by yourself and still have someone give you visual information without judgment.

But I think it's important to have a two-way discussion with the student and to base it on their own experience rather than just telling them what they should do, or giving them a lot of information with no direct basis in their personal experience. Talking it through is more valuable than 'explaining or telling' because a two-way dialogue makes the person feel more validated. So now you know my philosophy.

Experience is really the best teacher. I recently had an experience where I learned something about myself. I went to a birthday party with a friend and when we got there, there was another person there who has experience as an SSP. The friend I went with kind of dropped me with her. I didn't want to go with an SSP to this party because it felt awkward. I would have liked my husband to go but since he didn't want

to go, I ended up with this woman who was there as a guest. When I asked her to tell me who was there, what they were doing, etc., she was not good at giving me information. She wanted to talk with everyone. A deaf SSP at a deaf event can be a conflict because there is always that temptation to chat instead of focusing on SSP work.

I'm willing to do training, but I need to know more about how to use SSPs well myself first. I think for a person to be a good teacher they have to understand themselves better and have a good support system set up for themselves first. To be honest I don't yet.

Interviewer: I agree with that philosophy. The reason we're focused now on DB teachers is that historically we've focused on sighted people teaching SSPs. That's been the case for a long time. No one has thought about teaching DB people how to use SSPs, and using DB teachers to do that. So, we're asking ourselves "What it is that DB people need to know to use SSPs well and what is it to be a good teacher who is her/himself DB?"

For DB people who use SSPs, there are the issues of

- Who has control?
- Boundaries?

- **What kind of environmental information do you want?**
- **What makes a good match between a DB person and an SSP?**

These are the issues we see that DB people need to understand to use SSPs effectively.

So let me ask you about working with another teacher who is sighted. If I were to hire you tomorrow to teach DB people about SSPs and you were to work with another (sighted) teacher as a team – how would you organize it? I have another question too: if the DB student was a hard-of-hearing person, would you use an interpreter, an SSP? Would you want the sighted team member there? How would you set it up?

Aimee Chappelow Bader: I see. Well again, I've never organized things like that. I've relied on other people to do the coordinating, matching, and so on. I think I need training in that area. Also, I never thought about teaching a DB person who is hard-of-hearing. I guess I'd rely on them to bring their own interpreter. But that's another issue, to be honest, and I know it's wrong of me, but I don't talk much with hard-of-hearing DB people. I'm very comfortable using ASL and talking with other 'Deaf culture' people but not so

much talking with people who don't know ASL. I know that's wrong of me.

Interviewer: I understand, but this curriculum provides a framework for teaching all DB people, so a DB teacher would have to be prepared to instruct both hard-of-hearing DB people and those who use ASL.

So on that note, do you think DB teachers would benefit from having mentors?

Aimee Chappelow Bader: Yes, absolutely. Otherwise, each teacher would have to invent all the strategies and techniques on their own. It would be difficult to get enough experience and without experience it would be hard to have confidence. And besides, each teacher would have to set up their own support system. There are so many pieces to it, so many barriers; it feels overwhelming. I think a mentor would be wonderful. As you say, DB people are not natural leaders on our own. We expect someone to be there with us as a part of the team. I always have to have someone with me when I go out anywhere and it's discouraging.

[JN and ACB discuss the need for networking and mutual support among leaders.]

Interviewer: Now that we have the curriculum, we need to figure out what it would mean to be a good

mentor for DB teachers. How can we best use on-line tools, and what does it mean to have good tools? I myself am still trying to figure out what good tools would be. How can we best teach DB people?

We also want to document that, a record of standard approaches that can be useful to others, like what kind of media we can use. Video doesn't work for everyone because a DB person can't see the video. How effective is it to go through an interpreter, and when? Is Braille effective? If we write scenarios or scripts, what would that look like? These are huge questions.

Aimee Chappelow Bader: I agree. We will have to learn through trial and error – pilot test things and throw out what doesn't work. But there has to be a better approach too, because it would be so much work to go only through trial and error with no foundation. Really, I want to tell you how much I appreciate you doing this. You know that DB people all over the country don't have the advantage of a big DB Community like in Seattle where there is lots of time to be together, share ideas and learn from each other – discuss things and clarify ideas. Going to the American Association of the Deaf-Blind (AADB) every few years is not enough.

In places like KS it's hard enough to just lead your own life. Socials are a good place to start, to see what we need, and to train SSPs, but it's not possible for one person [leader] to do it alone. [Another leader] used to live here and when we worked together we could do more but she moved away, and now I feel like the Lone Ranger. That's why I need my compadres!

Jelica concludes the interview, thanks Aimee for her time and contributions to this project. Aimee reciprocates and says she would like to have updates on the curriculum, materials and mentoring.