

INTERVIEW WITH JAMIE POPE

This is an edited translation of an interview by Jelica Nuccio on August 26, 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.

Jamie Pope was the Executive Director of the American Association of the Deaf-Blind (AADB) until 2011. She has had experience teaching on 'Deaf-blind topics' for about 16 years professionally. This has been primarily workshops presented to audiences of non-deaf-blind people, such as interpreters, SSPs and formal presentations on "Deaf-Blind Awareness". She has also taught "Self Determination" workshops to deaf-blind children and youth. Pope is deaf and has very 'close vision'.

Interviewer: Tell us about the workshops you taught on "Self-Determination".

Jamie Pope: Yes, I was involved in National Technical Assistance Consortium for Deaf-blind Children & Youth. That was in 1996 as a part of their self-determination group. The goal was to teach self determination skills to youth, techniques for being aware of what's around them, how to make decisions for themselves, know their options, and so on so that when they grow up they will be better prepared as adults. The school curricula typically focuses on English, math and writing with no focus on social skills, on how to make decisions, or how to establish goals and achieve them, so we had to set up a self-determination workshops to teach these skills.

Interviewer: Interesting. What is your philosophy of teaching deaf-blind children, is it the same or different from sighted youth?

Jamie Pope: My philosophy is focused on how to encourage them to grow. My own experience as a deaf-blind child tells me how important role models are. They helped significantly in my own development. Many deaf-blind children do not have access to role models until they get to college where there are many, which is wonderful, but many deaf-blind children not have access to role models or even to other deaf-blind children who share their experience. I think it's important to meet a variety of DB adults so they can see different models and know they too can succeed. Basically, I'm applying what I learned from my own experience to my teaching of the children and youth. I present myself to the children as one model and tell them that if they would like what they see, if they choose to achieve, they can do it.

Interviewer: Shifting gears now, I'd like to focus on teaching materials. What kind of materials do you use for teaching, materials that suit you as a deaf-blind teacher and

materials that suit the DB people you teach? How do you choose your materials; what criteria do you use?

Interviewer: It depends on the student. I consider what skills they have, and their vision. If they have some vision I would print out the materials in a suitable format, for example large print and make copies of all the hand outs, as well as a print out of the Power-Point slides if I planned to use them. I also think it is better to give any materials to the participants ahead of time so they have the opportunity to review them before the presentation. If that is not possible for some reason, then I would make sure there is enough time during the presentation to look at the materials and then look up at the lecture (signing) so they do not miss the lecture while they are looking down at the materials. I also read [in Sign Language] what is on the Power-Point slides in case they cannot see them.

Interviewer: How do you prepare yourself? Considering the concept of what makes a good teacher, what criteria do you use for choosing the materials for any particular student?

Jamie Pope: I consider both the goal or purpose of the instruction and the student. I look at the curriculum and so on, and see what is available, what resources there are for that topic, and then I modify the materials' format, for example, enlarge the print or put it on a CD so the student can read it on their computer. If I can, I provide the materials electronically so they can save it for later review.

Time is a key consideration. A DB person needs time to look at the materials and look at the presenter.

Interviewer: Can you give us some specific examples?

Jamie Pope: Hmm, let me think. Well, for example I was a co-presenter at a conference of Vocational Rehabilitation administrators, and there were some DB people in the audience. I made sure any materials that would be handed out, such as the agenda, a copy of the Power-Point presentation (which was going to be projected in black & white which is not good) was made available both in large print, and electronically. We did not have a Braille printer so the information was given on a CD with the hope that the DB Braille readers had a Braille display on their own computer. I also made sure to read the Power-Points in Sign Language so people did not have to look at the paper; they could look at me. I did not want them to miss any of the information. They only have two eyes. They can't see everything at the same time. So again, anything in print: the agenda, power-points, any articles distributed, all would be in large print or in CD format, and as presenter I would be sure to read what is projected on the screen.

Interviewer: So it sounds like you mostly lecture. When you do that, do you depend on the Power-Point for your notes, or on the interpreter to tell you what Power-Point says? How do you use power-point presentations?

Jamie Pope: For me, I have my own copy on paper in front of me. Sometimes this works, and sometimes it does not. I prefer to look at the screen, but sometimes I can't see it for whatever reason. I've tried having the interpreter read the slides to me, but that takes too much time. It works better to keep a copy on the podium in front of me, but I do have to memorize a lot of things so that I'm not having to look down at the materials too much. Then, with much of it in my memory, I don't have to actually read it but just use it as a memory prompt. This seems to work pretty well.

Interviewer: So as a good teacher you must memorize a lot of the material to be able to do it yourself; you prepare.

Jamie Pope: Yes but I do use an interpreter for feedback from the audience, just not to read materials. The interpreter informs me of audience feedback and any questions from the audience. It's just the Power-Points I read myself.

Interviewer: What kind of feedback do you ask the interpreter to give you; can you give us some examples?

Jamie Pope: Sure. If I'm giving definitions or presenting something complicated I want to know the audience members' non-verbal responses. I want the interpreter to tell me if the faces reflect comprehension or have that glazed over look, if they seem puzzled, or interested (leaning forward) or resistant (leaning back with folded arms), if they seem bored, if they are laughing, and seem to catch the humor when appropriate. That information helps me to improve my presentations - from their responses. Then I can make my material more interesting and hold the audience attention better.

Interviewer: So you modify the materials and you get feedback during the presentation through the interpreter. Do you do any preparation with the interpreter? Is that enough to provide access? Is there anything else do you do to assure access?

Jamie Pope: I prepare the meeting room. The seating has to be set-up, perhaps in a circle, maybe in audience rows. I check that there is a podium, and where I and the interpreter will stand in relation to the participants. I review who will be in the audience and its composition. I take care of all the logistics, prepare the room, equipment and so on to make sure that everything is set up ahead of time so we do not take time away from the materials. I learned the hard way. Without this preparation there was wasted time; I kept people waiting.

Interviewer: When you teach SSPs do you use hands-on exercises, role plays or what tools do you find most effective?

Jamie Pope: Both those tools are good. I think observing them having hands-on experience and role play are good. I use both. I think it helps them remember the key points in the instruction. I observe their practice, using an interpreter to give me visual information about what they're doing, the level of their learning. I think the best part of the instruction is the actual practice because it continues their learning in a safe environment. They first see how it works, and learn how to use an SSP while being observed by the instructor. Immediate feedback works best so they can improve right away and not establish bad habits. Role play is good for teaching students to think through sticky situations. I do use it some but not often. I choose incidents that actually do happen and ask the students to think of solutions and then try them out through role play.

Interviewer: Do you observe the role play or do you participate as one of the actors?

Jamie Pope: They act it out while I watch. I don't get involved. I think the best learning happens when you're involved (for anyone, not just deaf-blind people) so the same principle applies to deaf-blind people too. They learn best when they are directly involved.

Interviewer: Do you prefer teaching DB people one-to-one or in a group? Our curriculum is very one-to-one. Also, if the DB person is hard-of-hearing, how do you relate to and communicate with them?

Jamie Pope: How people will participate depends heavily on their vision. It also depends on the program, specifically the funding, and time allowed. I agree that often one-to-one can be best but often people with close vision benefit more in a small group of 3-4 people because they learn from each other (assuming they can follow the discussion with the teacher helping to clarify). But tactile people need one-to-one obviously, while people with tunnel vision can be instructed in either configuration.

Interviewer: This is the first time we have any curriculum to teach deaf-blind people how to use SSPs; do you think this is a valuable contribution?

Jamie Pope: Yes, it's very important because we don't want to assume a person knows how to use an SSP just because they are deaf-blind. They have likely been using a friend or family member, and have set habits of relating to that helper that are not appropriate for relating to trained SSPs. For example, the issue of trust for a new person they have never met may arise. They may have the wrong idea about the relationship and may touch inappropriately.

Also DB people often have to be taught how to be assertive, that the SSP should not answer for them or assume that the SSP will “do for” them. In other words, they have to learn what the role is and how it is different from friends and family. They might also need to learn how to show respect and cultivate the SSP service.

Interviewer: One thing we are still figuring out is the best way to convey the kind of lab activities we have in the curriculum, since a video is not always accessible to DB teachers. Do you have suggestions for how to present this? For example, would you prefer to have an interpreter relay what is shown on a video or would you prefer a script?

Jamie Pope: I can come up with lab exercises or role plays myself but it might be helpful to watch a video or read a few sample scripts, yes.

Interviewer: The main question for us is access, assuming a DB person can't see the video.

Jamie Pope: Oh. I suggest both. It's good to have a script because an individual can always hire an interpreter. If you have the video and a transcript, then you have a choice.

Interviewer: What variation should we take into account in developing or using hands-on exercises and what is common for all DB people?

Jamie Pope: Culture is a big source of variation. Not all DB people share the same culture. Specifically, culturally Deaf people, hard-of-hearing people and 'hearing people' will interact differently. As DB people they will have many common experiences but the communication differences will affect the role plays. So it may be better to separate people into groups depending on their communication needs. All the role plays would be designed to make the same specific points, or cover the same topics, but the approach would be a little different.

Interviewer: Can you give us some examples of the cultural differences?

Jamie Pope: The differences are in how people interact. The Deaf culture way of talking with each other is more direct; there is more comfort with touching, there is a more oral tradition of teaching rather than through the use of writing. Deaf culture people are often more directly involved in any instructional activities and they tend to be more tactile. Hard-of-hearing people on the other hand listen aurally, not visually or tactually; they are used to learning through reading (whether in print or Braille). They do not use touch much unless they want to learn signs. They tend to go for a Cochlear

Implant. What they have in common is they both want visual information, but how they get the information is different.

Interviewer: Would you encourage touch for hard-of-hearing deaf-blind people?

Jamie Pope: I believe they're not used to tactile signing and not used to the natural touching that happens bumping into other people. DB people who use tactile communication are more used to touch in general; it's a natural part of life, but I think what is important to focus on in the curriculum is that the focus of the role plays, the goals or topics be the same. There are some specific common situations and the goal is to learn to deal with them.

Interviewer: Should hard-of-hearing DB people learn more about the use of touch to gain information?

Jamie Pope: Yes because when you touch something directly yourself, you get a lot more information than through an explanation, yes, I agree.

Interviewer: What do you think is the biggest challenge in teaching DB people, other than communication differences?

Jamie Pope: What is most challenging is a lack of understanding or exposure to the things around them. It is also very challenging if a person is dealing with recent loss of vision or hearing and is new to tactile communication. If the same person is faced with both lack of exposure, loss and recent change in communication, the issues are almost overwhelming. If the person is fluent in understanding Sign Language tactually, but still does not understand how the world works, how systems work, if they don't have social skills, good turn taking and listening skills, no or very limited experience, that is the kind of challenge that makes the work so very difficult!

Interviewer: How would you deal with those challenges?

Jamie Pope: It takes time, repetition in different ways, review. You may have to remind them of things, go over them again. It often takes repetition. You have to ask questions as you go along too, to check for understanding, and not wait for them to ask for clarification. You don't want to do the same thing again and again, but refresh and review the same material in different ways. Another issue is that you sometimes have to keep the student on track, keep them focused. They are often tempted to talk about other things in their lives.

Interviewer: So the teacher has to be patient, and flexible, and try multiple ways. It takes creativity. Is there more you would like to tell us, any success stories or advice?

Jamie Pope: It's important to hook up with others who do the same thing, to network, share resources and ideas. This should not be lonely work. The goal is to improve, and be more successful in what we do, so get feedback, support from others, new techniques. It's important we not become overwhelmed and burn out. Teaching DB people how to use SSPs effectively is so important. We all need support, and encouragement. We want to share resources with you.

Interviewer: Well that leads me to another question about working together in a team of sighted and deaf-blind people. How is it best to do that without depending on the sighted instructor? Should the DB person have their own interpreter? How can we work together with sighted people and remain equal members of the team? What kinds of things do you say to your sighted team members? You know that when you've been alone as a DB person for a long time it's easy to yield to sighted people. What kind of support is good?

Jamie Pope: I think it's important to emphasize that you are working together as a team, which means equality.

- Encourage the sighted person to draw directly on the deaf-blind person's expertise, give them time to respond, to participate.
- Discuss your own skills and weaknesses ahead of time so you both balance as a team.
- You should talk together first, agree on who will do what, plan carefully and then afterwards, review, and evaluate. It's important that you contribute equally.

Interviewer: One last question. What advice do you have going forward in using this curriculum in the best way? Do you think there should be a mentorship for other teachers?

Jamie Pope: I would advise DB teachers to read through the curriculum, get the overall idea behind the curriculum, that it is designed for a team of teachers. Don't try to teach the curriculum alone. It would not be effective since it is designed for a deaf-blind instructor & sighted instructor to teach together. You should choose the team carefully, someone you have worked with successfully before. Still, things will come up and I would also advise both team members to bring up issues soon, to not hold-onto-feelings that become resentments and interfere with good teamwork. Set aside time together to talk, to see what you have learned; have an open discussion. If you try to do everything yourself, you will fail. Finally, ask questions; learn from everyone.