

SAMPLE TRAINING OF A DEAF-BLIND STUDENT, aj granda¹ INSTRUCTOR

The Scene: aj granda and the DB student are seated side by side with their legs touching, in straight-backed chairs of the type used in meeting rooms. They are facing each other and are close enough to communicate tactually. The camera is off to the side, somewhat facing aj but takes in the student and her signing as well. Both aj and the student are wearing black; both have their hair pulled back from their face. They are seated in a room that appears to be a small meeting room of the type found in many non-profit agencies. The furniture (tables and book cases) are pushed to the side, some of which has been covered by dark-blue sheets. The two are seated in the middle of the room.

aj begins by signing visually to the DB student who is seated very close to her. The student is deaf-blind with very close vision and in this session reads aj's signs visually. At a few times in the training aj leans somewhat forward and the hand of a third person can be seen resting lightly on aj's shoulder. This is the hand of her SSP who is simply 'being present' but not actively working during the session.

aj granda: "So, we're here for training – to learn how to use an SSP [aj reaches her left hand out for feedback (back channeling) from the student, who signs "yes, ok" as she continues] what the term means, how to use an SSP, everything about it, ok, sound good?"

The student, Jenny-Lynn (JL), signs "Yes; I'm ready". [They both smile-laugh in semi-embarrassment at the awkwardness of being videotaped.]

aj granda: So... I, myself, don't know much about your experience. Have you used SSPs before?

Jenny-Lynn: Yes, one or two times, I've used an SSP maybe one or two times, that's all. I've had some training with Ray.

From here on, throughout the lesson, aj signs visually to Jenny-Lynn. While Jenny-Lynn is listening she leaves her left hand on aj's leg to give her back-channel signals. She signs tactually to aj who reads signs with her left hand and occasionally uses her right hand on Jenny-Lynn's left, upper arm for back-channeling since Jenny-Lynn cannot see clearly enough to read aj's facial expressions.

aj granda: So the SSP purpose, do you know the purpose or function of an SSP?

¹ A. J. Granda prefers that her name be spelled with all lower case letters. We have thus called her "aj" throughout.

Jenny-Lynn: Support Service Provider².

aj granda: Yes, a support service provider, right. Do you know what they are for? What is their service; what service do they provide?

Jenny-Lynn: What I imagine is they provide visual information about the surroundings, the situation, and secondly they explain what's happening, read labels on jars, ...guide and read information. That's all I know about the purpose of an SSP.

aj granda: That is for sure a big part of it, visual information is a critical part of what they do. So the critical parts of what they do are 1) visual-environmental information, 2) transportation, and 3) guide, those are the three components. That's basically the service they provide.

Jenny-Lynn: So guide, yes focus on guiding through obstacles or in dark places but suppose the DB person would have a cane or would they have to focus on the SSP?

aj granda: Right, the DB person who uses a cane might be able to walk to the store, or destination without the help of the SSP but with the SSP it improves navigation, it saves time, it's faster, it helps for going through people or around corners; so the point of an SSP being a guide is that it is time-efficient. Myself, for example, I can use my cane and go to the store by myself but it's slower, I have to be careful, I have to look harder to locate things, keep checking around me, and by the end of my shopping trip I'm worn out; it's exhausting. So I prefer going with an SSP who can guide me by putting their hand on my shoulder or arm and we go quickly; it's faster because their eyes do all the work for me. That's the purpose of an SSP guiding.

Jenny-Lynn: I understand better now. Thank you.

aj granda: I know some DB people feel that if they use an SSP they'll be seen as 'disabled' or dependent; they worry that the SSP will take control of their lives. Not at all, in fact, it's the opposite. I feel a real boost to my power, an increase of control over my life with an SSP. We get so much more information! Really, it's the best!

... Yes, to be clear, the person who serves as an SSP may have another, separate job as an interpreter, of course. But the SSP is not accompanying you as an interpreter. But, there are specific, very limited exceptions to the 'no interpreting rule' such as – well, let's say you're with the SSP going to the store and you want some 1% milk; you go to the refrigeration section and look, but it seems they're out of 1%. This seems very

² JL has misunderstood the sign 'purpose' which is very close to the sign 'mean' and has answered that the acronym SSP "means" support service provider.

unlikely so you and the SSP go over to the clerk – that kind of interpreting, if the SSP is willing – and you ask the clerk what’s up with the milk, and the clerk replies that they are out, and you ask when they’ll restock and the clerk says the next delivery is the following Friday and that’s the end of it. So that kind of very brief exchanges an SSP can interpret. It’s not really called interpreting, because the point is to just get information so you can go on with your errands.

Jenny-Lynn: ok.

aj granda: But, doctor’s appointments or going to a bank to discuss an issue – the SSP can’t interpret for that kind of exchange. For those discussions you would use a real interpreter.

Jenny-Lynn: Right, right.

aj granda: I want to talk a little bit about the Code of Ethics. There are, out there in the Community some SSPs. Suppose a DB person asks their spouse, their friend, or partner to be their SSP, can they do that?

Jenny-Lynn: I feel it would be a conflict.

aj granda: Right, it’s a clear conflict of interest. Why do you think that is?

Jenny-Lynn: Well, I think it would be a conflict because what you’ve described is involving someone in the family and the SSP might feel uncomfortable if there is a problem at home or something, the person would feel awkward.

aj granda: It’s too close personally. And the power relations are different, right! You value that spousal relationship or that friendship, you treasure that family relationship and in a family the DB person is not in charge, they all help each other out, solve problems together, and the relationships are mutual, but in the SSP relationship, the SSP belongs to the DB person. The DB person is in charge. The SSP is there 100% for the DB person. The DB person makes the decisions, period.

So similarly, a case manager, for example, can a case manager become an SSP for a DB person?

Jenny-Lynn: No, I would prefer not.

aj granda: You don’t have to prefer not, [smiling] it’s totally not allowed.

Jenny-Lynn: [both chuckle] That’s a good thing.

aj granda: Yes, again, it's a conflict of interest, period. If you work as a case manager for a deaf-blind client and then after work you offer to become their SSP, it's a conflict of interest. The reason again is that it is too personal³. So the same principle applies to brothers and sisters, good friends, that kind of thing; it's a conflict of interest and we don't recommend it, you're right. So that's clear.

So, you understand the role of SSP and ethical considerations. Now as a DB person, let's talk about how you develop a relationship with the SSP, how you ask for what you want. The people who have been SSPs are sighted, perhaps hearing, and by virtue of that they have more power in the world. They can see the environment easily, they have more access to information, so should they make decisions for you?

Jenny-Lynn: No, they should not.

aj granda: Exactly. But it's so easy to fall into that situation. They have more power, they can see, so it's tempting to give them control and have them make all the decisions. So then the issue becomes HOW we as DB people can make sure we are running the show ourselves.

... We train our SSPs how to provide visual information. Now, there's a lot of visual information out there. [JL says "Yes."] The SSP has to tell the DB person what's important. The floor has green and blue in the carpet and I can see a tripod over there [aj smiles at the videographer] and ... is that important, or [JL interrupts]...

Jenny-Lynn: Yes. It depends on how big the floor is.

aj granda: [laughing] well, see you already know there is a range of what is important – it's a continuum. So my point: is it more important to describe the floor or let you know who is here? Or is it more important to give you a sense of the mood of the room, are people losing energy, getting tired, or grinning with excitement? There's a lot to choose from. So as you say – it's all important but it depends – how much to tell you, and when are issues.

³ The DB person is in a position of authority over both SSPs and interpreters so it is not a conflict for the same person to occasionally act as SSP and another time as an interpreter. For family members or case managers, on the other hand, the situation is different as aj explained above. Further, aj explained in another exchange that it is not good for one professional (e.g. the case manager) to have too much information (e.g. information she would learn about the DB person from working with them as a SSP). The Community is very small and when one person is involved in too much of the DB person's life it becomes too intimate and not appropriate.

So having that kind of discussion with your SSP is critical. Any questions so far?

Jenny-Lynn: No, [smile] not yet. As we go along I'm sure I will think of some.

aj granda: Good. So, I'll use a restaurant as an example and you ask the SSP to read the menu for you. But suppose this is a restaurant with a menu that is pages and pages long. Do you want the SSP to literally read through the entire menu: hamburgers with mushrooms, hamburgers with avocados, hamburgers with red onions...

Jenny-Lynn: That's a lot of information. [aj: right, yes.] Maybe it would be better to ask the SSP to read through and give me the headings, not all the details of each entry, all the ingredients and so on.

aj granda: Right. A menu is organized in categories of sandwiches, salads and so on, so the SSP can read the categories for you and then that's when you can tell the SSP 'I'm interested in hamburgers without any vegetables, just plain.' And the SSP can narrow the description down to what you are interested in hearing about. So you can use that kind of big picture down to what you are more specifically interested in. So you help guide the SSP. [JL umhm.]

So another example is going into a grocery store. Is the SSP responsible to tell you everything in the store, no. So what kind of information would you need or want in a grocery store, tell me?

Jenny-Lynn: Well, maybe I would bring a list of what I wanted and give the list to the SSP to read over and find each of the items matching the list, and I would follow the SSP. So this would help the SSP and DB person too to save time.

aj granda: That's one strategy, yes. You can give the list to the SSP and the SSP take over from there. That's one way, but how can YOU as a DB person keep your power? A list is helpful, yes to tell the SSP what you plan to buy. So, what do you prefer, to walk up and down each aisle, or start with one item, say milk, and ask the SSP to guide you to the milk and indicate where it is?

Jenny-Lynn: So it depends on what I plan to do. Sometimes I like to go down each aisle but it helps if I get to know the store, so it depends.

aj granda: That's true. There are a number of factors: whether this is your first time in the store for example. I know I tend to shop at the same store all the time and I know where things are there but I'm still the boss, I decide where to go and the SSP tells me what's there.

Jenny-Lynn: If it's the first time in a new store I like to go up and down each aisle, that's how I get used to it and then once I know the store, it's not necessary.

aj granda: Yes, and the point is you go up and down each aisle because YOU want to do that, because you need to know that information, not the SSP. It may benefit the SSP too but YOU are the one who decides what you want from the time. You can tell the SSP 'this is my first time in the store so I'd like to go up and down each aisle.' The SSP can't avoid benefiting too but the whole point is that YOU decide everything; you're the boss. What you need, or what you want is what's important. [JL starts to interrupt but aj holds the floor]

aj granda: right. Suppose there are sale items, do you want to know that? You like sales right?

Jenny-Lynn: Yes, I would want to know and if there are sales for the SSP to show me where.

aj granda: Exactly. The 'two for one' – Whole Foods, where I tend to shop – tends to have that kind of a sale 'two for one price' so I tell the SSP to look for those '2 for the price of 1' sales because by myself I miss seeing many things, it's unbelievable the sales and specials that the SSP points out to me.

So do you need the SSP to tell you the price of an item? [JL: Yes.] Different DB people have many different kinds of vision, some can see far, some only close up, it varies but the point of the SSP is that it is very time-efficient. It's really cool. As I told you I can shop by myself, but it takes a really long time. When I'm by myself I have to get fairly close and look carefully at the price tag below each item on the shelf one by one. I'm still used to shopping by myself but with the SSP, I've learned to ask for a quick run along the shelf of prices and it goes so fast. It's really cool.

Jenny-Lynn: It helps a lot, and saves time.

aj granda: Exactly. That's what an SSP is for, to work for you. You can ask for visual information, 'What does that look like? How much does it cost? What's on sale?' What else do you think would benefit you?

Jenny-Lynn: It's hard for me to see the difference between kinds of apples.

aj granda: Good, exactly, and other things – maybe whether or not they are organic. Some people prefer to eat organic apples or tomato sauce. There are all kinds of tomato sauce but they're not all organic so you can ask the SSP to point out the organic ones specifically.

It seems you now have the idea. Do you think so? [JL: Yes.] And, again, the point is that the SSP is for you so you can do and get what you want.