

TEACHING STYLES AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS, PART ONE

Interviewer: Do you use a PowerPoint, type it up and then elaborate on what is on the PowerPoint or do you read your notes and elaborate on that, what is the best technique for DB teachers?

Kim Powers

I make notes for myself in Braille! Before the class, when I'm preparing, if I'm working off a PowerPoint for students who can see it, I work hard to study it, memorize what's on it, and then make notes for myself in Braille. Then when I'm teaching I basically ignore the PowerPoint and explain things from my notes. It works fine. The students can look at me then up at the PowerPoint presentation, back and forth, and it works fine. So I teach from my Braille notes but I have an SSP by my side, who gives me visual information, either signing to me or through signals like taps on the shoulder, to inform me as to what people in the audience are doing, their eye contact and whether they are ready to watch me sign because of course, they're looking back and forth between me and the power point, so with the SSP I know when to resume.

...I try my best. You know in my heart, my passion, personally what I really like is to depend on Braille only but I try to match what the students need. So, I'd rather teach another DB person because, we are the same and I feel that deep connection; we both use touch, and that's really cool. But, we really need SSPs and interpreters – their eyes and ears – to tell us everything that is out there, so teaching them is important. Socializing with other DB people is fine if we can, but it's not enough. I want to teach DB people to get out of their shell of isolation, fear, and depression. I can't stand to see DB people choking their feelings back, desperately alone. It's pitiful. I know other people in the world look at DB people with horror and pity. This is wrong. I want to teach DB people that this is not the way. You have to find your power, open yourself up, put on a smile, and go out there. Tell people that "I am a normal human being just like any other human being, just like you, I am competent." Stand strong.

So, the interpreters, we need the interpreters to understand deaf-blind rules. They should respect DB people, work with the DB person as a peer, and be at ease and comfortable with tactile communication. For example, Theresa Smith acts according to the DB way, she's has that inner sense and it comes out naturally and with warmth. She matches the communication of each person.

SSPs, you must know the DB rules well, and know the DB person well, their backgrounds and so on, fine. But I want to teach you and interpreters and DB people all together to be warm hearted towards each other, understanding, accepting, supportive of each other and work together in collaboration and cooperation.

Now, I want to share with you what I've experienced. Some people think SSPs and interpreters are the same thing. This is not it. SSPs inform the DB person of absolutely everything. Interpreters focus on what they hear, what people say, and the SSP takes what the interpreter signs. For example, the doctor's office: the DB person and the SSP come in together and sign in, then sit down and wait until the interpreter arrives and then the three of you wait. When they call your name the SSP can't go into the examining room. But, ok, it's not that simple. The SSP should make sure the interpreter knows how to guide properly, be with the DB person while they're getting weighed, and describe everything in the room, explaining where things are, how they are arranged in the room, drawing a tactile map in your hand (it's just like a photo of the floor plan of the office projected onto your hand, drawn in your hand). Then the SSP goes and sits in the waiting area while the interpreter takes over for the actual examination and discussion with the nurse and doctor and so on. When the DB person comes out again and the interpreter is finished, and the medication has been explained and so on, that's it. So, it's important to tell the difference between an interpreter and an SSP and... the DB person [can then be] independent.

Bruce Visser

Well over the years I've evaluated a number of different approaches and I've learned a few things. The lesson has to be based on the individual situation. DB people vary so I have to consider the individual I'm working with, their access, and me too, I'm deaf-blind, so I have to consider my access as well, and the suitability of the environment. For example, this dark background behind me, is it necessary? I don't know. I have to consider the student's language whether they are fluent users of ASL or use a more English influenced variety of sign, and consider the pace of communication; my clothing (a plain dark shirt), the lighting in the room: how bright it should be, the direction of it, and then the technology itself that I am teaching about. All these factors must be analyzed to make sure that the learning experience is the best. If it's only 'so-so', then the effectiveness of my teaching is also going to be 'so-so'. You have to consider all these factors regarding communication and the environment.

...So, you have to think carefully about their communication, and the environment. Now training always includes some kind of 'feedback'. As you go along you have to pay close attention to how the student is progressing. If there's something overlooked, missing, or misunderstood, you have to back up to that point and then you can then proceed. So there is that cycle, an on-going feedback loop: the teacher to the student, the student feeding back to the teacher and so on. It's an on-going process. The first few classes will not be so smooth while you're still learning the best way to communicate with each other. Once you have that down you'll be comfortable in working with each other and can make fast progress.

... As a teacher I think:

- It's important to be able to assess where the student is in the learning process.
- You must yourself be a skilled communicator.
- Your attitude is key, the teacher's attitude. You have to be ready to discuss things; sometimes the student will be feeling so frustrated and you have to talk about it and acknowledge that it's tough.
- The other thing is that information changes – maybe last week it was this and now it's not. It's true, information is always changing.
- You have to be a positive role model. The student has to feel that you as a teacher also feel these frustrations and challenges so when they're struggling they want to know that it was hard for you too, or about the changes that it's difficult for you too, so they don't feel they're the only one. It's easy to feel "it's just me – it's just because I'm a DB person – it's just one more burden I have to put up with." But, no I have those frustrations too and sighted people, hearing people or deaf people too, feel frustrated. It's important for the teacher to genuinely share that so the DB person doesn't feel they're the only one.