

TEACHING STYLES AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS, PART TWO

Interviewer: What does it mean to be a good teacher?

Bapin

I myself am a teacher by nature; it was intuitive because both my parents were teachers so they gave that to me, instilled that in me. My primary interest is, of course, technology, but along with that – I think I'm good at teaching too. But to answer your question, a good teacher must first understand each DB person they are teaching, each as an individual and their need for access to information and how they best receive instruction. By this I mean through which language and how: ASL, a more English-like communication, and the pace. They may prefer palm-printing or reading Braille. So that is the first thing to figure out.

Then, as a teacher I must know the student's level of ability to understand that language, their level of education and sophistication. If, for example, they have an advanced command of English, then I can feel comfortable using technical terms. If their command of English is more average then I have to adjust the way I talk about the technology in a less sophisticated way so that they can understand.

Third, to provide instruction I must make a connection with them – their background and my background as DB people helps. We share that. So when they are frustrated or perhaps confused about technology I try to put myself in their shoes, imagine what their everyday lives are like, their access to information. For example, are they able to keep up with the news or are they left in the dark as to what has been happening? Are they able to communicate effectively with their family members or is that another source of frustration? Maybe they don't have access to a telephone. So these are things I use to help me put myself into their world first before I proceed. Then I can choose technology to fill the gaps in their access, and I can make what I teach be compatible with all of that [their language, background information, emotional readiness and needs]. It's important to instill a positive sense of hope and courage and trust that I can offer them something that will be useful to them.

Then fourth, the instructional materials have to be adapted because the instructions or steps can be complex and while some DB people are exceptionally good at memorizing things like the steps to operating devices, not all are, so I have to make a simplified list of instructions they can follow. The sentences should be short and the explanation simple, something I give them after I've shown them how to operate the device and they've had some hands-on experience doing it themselves. The materials serve primarily as a memory aid for them to use later to help them recall what they learned in the class, materials they can use as a reference.

Interviewer: We have activities in our curriculum (hands-on practice) where the students go to a store or other location where they can apply what they have learned and the instructor goes with their own interpreter-SSP to observe how well they do, how they communicate, how the SSP guides and provides information, and the DB person is learning how to explain what they are looking for, etc. So as the teacher, how would you get information, visual information through an interpreter or SSP or...?

I've done that kind of thing before, not exactly, but going with my student to a store to learn how to use a device for 'face-to-face communication' with a cashier. We went with his Independent Living Skills Instructor, but they did not know much about technology. So I went with my own SSP and the two of us stood behind the two of them and observed. The SSP told me everything that he was doing, all the details, and that way if he made a mistake I could approach and explain how to do it better, like if he pushed the wrong key on the device, I could call his attention to that, to correct it. So I'd do the same thing for teaching SSPs or a DB person learning to use SSPs. I'd prefer to have an SSP with me who is very experienced and skilled and we would follow behind, "like a fly on the wall" and observe. And if I noticed anything wrong, I would approach and explain directly to the person, and then go back to observing. So there would be the four of us, the DB person with their SSP and me as teacher with my expert SSP.

aj granda

What would make a good teacher for DB people? The foundation of effective teaching is the Pro-Tactile philosophy – a new philosophy that has just recently been disseminated, that's what will make a class successful. Instruction includes touch, always! All people in the class would use tactile communication. If a person still has relatively good tunnel vision that is fine! The Pro-Tactile philosophy encourages people to use their vision too as an extra source of information and access to the world – but always use tactile signing. It is a radical change in our thinking.

I've been working on techniques and approaches putting this philosophy into practice for the last 5 years. It's important to have an even number of students (that's because I was the only teacher before) so with an even number they can work in pairs. That's the way I did it for the early years until in this most recent class Jelica and I decided to co-teach and it was ten times better. With the two of us it meant we could increase the number of students in the class to seven: two pairs, and one group of three. You might wonder why or how we would work with a group of 3 DB students. This was so that people in the class could have 3-way conversations – 3 people in the conversation – at the same time. Now not all DB people are proficient at this yet but this was an opportunity. They could learn if they did not know how. So, we grouped people into two pairs and a threesome for a total of seven students. This way two of the three groups had the personal attention of one teacher at any given time while the other group

worked independently. Then we rotated around and around; with seven people and one teacher this could take a lot of time but with the two of us it was great. Besides, there were two minds thinking about the students and the class so it doubled the contribution to the class.

So this comes back to the Pro-Tactile philosophy, by developing the skills of DB people to communicate tactually in a group of three; it doesn't matter if there is an odd number or an even number. We involve all people all the time regardless of their personality – whether they are somewhat reserved, regardless of their skill or lack of skill at reading tactile sign and regardless whether they have partial vision or are fully blind, or their education. This philosophy values ALL DB people being included, all the time.

Historically this has not been the case. If we look at the way it has been, there has been one small group of DB people with tunnel vision signing visually with each other, and another small group of fully blind people talking one-to-one or through interpreters, and then a third small group of DB people with Usher II, hard-of-hearing people talking, doing their best to communicate. The Community was fractured into tiny clusters. That's the way it's been for much too long. How can all DB people be united? The answer is Pro-Tactile. It's so much better!

So now, I get to Jelica's original question "What makes a good DB teacher?" That's my answer: a good DB teacher understands the Pro-Tactile philosophy; eagerly applies this Pro-Tactile philosophy and shares its values.

... Now I'd like to give you an example of how this philosophy works in practice, how to apply it specifically with a DB person teaching DB people. First, keep in mind the concept and values of Pro-Tactile. So now I'll explain or rather demonstrate Pro-Tactile by first giving you an example of why touch is so valuable. First, I'll demonstrate a more traditional way of communicating without Pro-Tactile and then after that, the recommended way using Pro-Tactile. Then you can compare and see the difference. OK? Ready? So first, no use of Pro-Tactile philosophy. [aj begins a role play and tactually communicates to Jelica]

"I'm going to take a drink of coffee." [Jelica removes her hand. aj proceeds to lean down, pick up her thermos, unscrews the lid and takes a drink, then re-screws the lid. As she is closing her thermos Jelica taps her on the knee. aj picks up Jelica's hand again as Jelica asks: "Are you done?" and aj responds "Yes." Aj begins to say.." so that's without.. but Jelica interrupts and asks "How was your coffee?" aj replies with a big smile "Delicious."

Now, that was with no Pro-Tactile. The DB person gets less information. Now, with Pro-Tactile. Ready?

“I’m going to take a drink of coffee.” [Jelica leaves her hand on aj’s who then proceeds to lean down, pick up her thermos, and unscrews the lid. As she does so, Jelica slides her hand down the thermos. Aj switches the lid to her signing hand and takes a drink with her non-signing hand. As she does so, Jelica maintains contact with the hand holding the lid. As aj re-screws the lid, Jelica again touches the thermos adding her other hand to explore the bottom of the thermos. Once the lid is screwed on, Jelica touches the lid and says “Hmmm, I see.” Aj says “Yep, it’s cool. It’s new; I just bought it today.” Jelica says “Yes, interesting because there is a loop on the lid.” Aj says “Yes, that way I can hook it up to my backpack,” Jelica acknowledges, “Ahh” and aj continues, “It’s hard to have to hold it in one hand, and try to use my cane with the other; it’s awkward. Better to have it hook up to my backpack.”
[The End]

So now, you see the reason for the value of Pro-Tactile. Sighted people pick up incidental information all the time by just scanning. They see other people’s things like a new type of backpack or thermos or haircut and DB people miss all this if the SSP forgets to inform them of these details. So that’s the point: direct information through touch, DB people always involved; that’s how I teach.