TEACHING TECHNIQUES, PART ONE

Interviewer: So the point is we want to focus here on teaching techniques because Deaf-Blind teachers do not have enough experience or rather there are not enough [experienced] DB teachers out there. There are many hearing-sighted and deaf-sighted teachers teaching DB people but the approach is very, very different, so we want to know what techniques or style you use as a DB person teaching DB students, so DB teachers can see which of these fit some of their students and fit it with their experiences teaching DB people to use SSP services.

Bruce Visser

Role play definitely is something to use; you definitely need to use examples. Some DB people like to hear the explanation first, get all the background, talk about it before getting to the technology. Then I ask the student if they are interested in a role play, me demonstrating first how it is used, going through each step with them and then they try. Some people then get part way, then go off track while others go right through the steps to success and realize what it can do.

What I mean -- they realize of how useful it can be because sometimes a DB person is surprised. They were totally unaware that such devices or resources exist. Another reason is fear of failure or shame of being so different because they are deaf-blind [and hesitance to try]. But as a teacher I counter that. What's important, I tell them, is your access, your learning and access to information. What's important is not that you are like another person, so it's important to find what works for you personally. Then the instruction can be successful. I think it is important for the student to think about these things, their own learning styles – and then, as a teacher, be aware and not just follow one's own style, but consciously match the learning style of the student.

Communication is key. With a person who is totally blind, it's important that I make sure we really connect, that my signing is clear and clear for them. Once they say confidently that it is, it is often best to begin class with a comfortable conversation, perhaps over a cup of coffee to really establish communication, focus on what strategies and techniques work best, then when we are both ready we move to the formal instruction and we can make rapid progress. But it's important to establish that foundation first, that's the element that makes the whole thing work.

…Yes, for this kind of instruction or training I would definitely recommend one-to-one, just the two of us communicating directly, yes.

aj granda

Analyzing how DB to DB instruction works historically and how we do it now, it has definitely come a long way. You can't really say any one thing about all DB teachers because DB teachers vary so much one from another. We vary in educational backgrounds, age, and teaching style... in many ways, but the one basic commonality for us is the use of hands-on, of touch, which gives us a common footing. How much or the kind of vision a person has: tunnel vision, close vision or being completely blind is not the point. Touch, the use of touch puts us all on a common footing, makes us equal.

Of course, students vary too. In my experience, for a class, it's best to select or group people according to their ability to communicate easily. The reason is there are differences between people who are fluent at reading tactile sign on the one hand, and people who are new to tactile communication/sign in another group. If you have a group with one person who communicates quickly and easily in tactile sign and five people who are new at it, it makes it very hard to reach a balance. It's better to have at least half and half. Because as the teacher I'm not going to be the only person teaching; it's important that members of the class can teach and learn from each other. Peer to peer learning is powerful! We learn best from our peers.

It's important that there be a sense of parity among members of the group. And I as a teacher am fully involved as a participant, as a member of the group. I get in there as a student too, but of course they still look to me as the teacher so it's important – best to have the same level of communication in the class so they can effectively work with each other. So that's how we set up the class by dividing them into 'communication groups' and explaining the tasks or information to the half the class who understood quickly and then while they worked with each other, focused on the other half who needed more time. Alternatively, of course, you can have a group of people who are all skilled at communicating -- either way works.

…Now, it's important that you understand I'm not just talking about parity among Usher I people who are fluent tactile ASL users when I talk about the importance of using touch. Suppose we have a group of all tactile signers and one person with Usher II joins the class; that does not mean the Pro-Tactile approach will not work. Not at all. It will still work. By a person with Usher II, I mean a person who is using an interpreter with them to understand what is said, that is fine. That's great. In this case, the interpreter too would learn to internalize and use the Pro-Tactile approach as the person with Usher II is learning to internalize and use it, because it is touch that gives full access, right? So the point is that if it's not ASL that's fine, you STILL use touch. So, by touch I mean physical contact, not necessarily reading signs, but physical contact, perhaps on the knee... and… [thinking] using 'back channeling' – the kind of thing we do non-verbally through facial expression visually, or non-verbal sounds auditorily, like uhnhunh, oh, mm, doing this through active physical contact – back channeling taps on the hand, or

leg, or shoulder depending on whether you're sitting, standing and so on. So the person with Usher II can still be listening auditorily and at the same time, have physical contact and receive back channeling tactilely using both modalities. What's important is that connection with one another through touch. So it's still applies to a deaf-blind person using an interpreter.

Also, the person with Usher II needs to learn better how to communicate this with the SSP so they don't have to depend 100% on just partial hearing but use touch as well. Say for example, the SSP would say, "Bob is standing on your right side." If the SSP did not know how to use a Pro-Tactile approach, the DB person would have to reach out their hands, and feel around a bit to locate Bob to make contact with him, but the Usher II person can teach the SSP to first identify Bob and then guide their hand to Bob's shoulder [Jelica nods in agreement.] So this way the DB person gets more information - through touch.

…how a DB student can feel ready to learn. This is true of everyone. If you feel timid, or hesitant in a situation because you don't know really who is there, you're more reserved, you're distracted with inner thoughts, and you're not fully engaged, you don't absorb the information; it's hard to really pay attention, be totally focused and excited about the new information and what you're learning. This is a very natural phenomenon; it's true of anyone. So I as a teacher want everyone to feel comfortable. You know as a student we want to feel good about ourselves, confident, so we take a shower to feel fresh, choose our clothes, maybe a favorite shirt, have a cup of coffee with us, and be totally ready when we sit down in class, you know the kinds of things we do; everyone has their personal ways. But if you don't know who else is there, this is the first time you've met, you've taken a shower and so on but touch – that's the challenge.

So what I do as a teacher is first greet each person individually (using touch), introduce myself "Hi, I'm aj, who are you?" I go around to each person and then I ask the students to line-up in two rows facing each other, everyone in the room, and for 2 minutes each, introduce themselves to the person facing them. After 2 minutes the lines shift. Once everyone has had a chance to meet everyone and touch, the dynamics in the room change tremendously. The students then all feel good; they know who is there and feel confident with just this simple change. Then, we're ready to start the class by sitting in pairs. Without interpreters you have to do it this way. It's the same with a workshop. The students interact with one another on specific tasks, and then we rotate every five minutes or ten minutes. They discuss and then rotate. …

Sighted people have the privilege of using their vision to look around the room, see who is there and automatically screen information, to get socially oriented. They see people they may not care for, others they are glad are there, someone they are surprised is

there, and so on. They make these assessments and decisions in an instant, a nanosecond using vision. Vision is incredible. So, …DB people? That's why I always start a class by lining up so everyone can feel connected.

Jelica has just asked me what if the DB person says no, they don't want to participate in that, they feel more comfortable using an SSP; they are used to doing things that way and are comfortable with it? That's fine. The fact that I teach SSPs to be Pro-Tactile and am a proponent of that, doesn't mean that I'm some radical who wants to do away with sighted people, do away with interpreters, not at all. Confidentially, I can't live without SSPs, I can't live without interpreters, just so you know, I cherish them. They're essential to my quality of life. They are so important and I'm more than grateful to have them. But the question is, how can I honor my DB culture, how can I preserve my DB power? We have power, we do! But it's hidden, we don't use it; the DB Community is divided into even smaller groups, separated from one another and I want us to really come together in one community, including sighted people too. We need to connect with one another, be united. So that's the reason I do the double lines to 'see' who's there tactually, to screen the information ourselves, to preserve that power and gain our own knowledge through touch!

That individual real sensory contact with each person through touch is guaranteed to make the DB person feel more present, more connected than passively sitting and listening to an interpreter list off a bunch of names. To hear that "Bob is here" is not the same as touching Bob's big hands yourself. To hear that Jane is here is not the same as touching her and smelling the soap she's used.

The process of the sighted person relaying all the information also implies in a subtle but powerful way that the sighted person is the source of all knowledge. Pro-Tactile changes that. So, yes, suppose it is the DB person themselves who says they prefer to use an SSP or interpreter, once they actually do it, put hands on, that person will be blown away by the experience of touching each person in turn, the amount of information available through that process as opposed to just hearing who is there.

So that's how I always start my workshop and it's proven again and again that information gained through touch is power and that through touch you can get almost everything.