

CLOSING CEREMONY 2010 “REFLECTION PIECES”

The following pieces were written by the members of the second cohort of students enrolled in the SFSU-CDBS Deaf-Blind Endorsement program. The selections were pulled from reflections written by the students during their fieldwork or internship experiences with program. Each piece selected is a strong representation of each candidate’s unique experiences, philosophies, and approaches to the fields of deaf-blindness and education.

Heidi Hubrich: *The importance of a multi-sensory approach*



One of my favorite things when hearing David Brown speak about kids is the focus on the multi-sensory approach. Many times people view children as having a hearing and vision loss with the attempt to intervene on each one of those losses. The vestibular and proprioceptive senses are often “forgotten” but are very much tied to other sensory losses and have a huge impact on the child’s learning and relationship with their environment. David talked about a girl who would rock from foot to foot. The teacher viewed it as a “blindism,” or stereotyped behavior that needed fixing. David saw it as giving the child input on which way is up, where they are, and creating a safe area. One behavior; two totally different views. Educators and parents so often have an idea of how a child should look and behave, the “goal,” and think about how we can fix the kid rather than try to understand them. As David said, “Education isn’t about fixing, it is about helping the student become who they are.” This young lady developed her own movement to stabilize herself with the ground and realize her place in the environment. This is an advanced skill that many students never realize. We as educators need to take what students give us as a jumping off point for how to utilize their skills rather than fix them.

This makes me think of a student who loves to sing and often does so across all settings (community instruction, riding the bus, academics and PE). This seemed to really frustrate the staff and they were always telling him to be quiet and I have even heard them say shut up! There are many reasons he could be singing; boredom, it feels good, he enjoys it, or it could just be his way of getting through a task. One day at PE he was singing more and louder than usual and wanted no part of cane walking or ball play. I decided to sing a line of *Brown-Eyed Girl*, say “1-2-3 catch,” which is his cue to put out his hands for the ball, and then toss the ball. We repeated this several times, every other time I would wait for him to sing. Not only did he have full participation in the PE activity, he got to sing and hear singing as a reward for each ball toss. The compromise of working with this student’s behavior rather than trying to fix it helped get the task at hand done while also allowing for him to sing appropriately. David focused on tapping into the student’s interests and helping them develop them. I believe this was an example of developing the student’s interest in an appropriate and meaningful way.

Kiernan Rok: *The importance of viable meaningful communication*

In my experience, for students who are considered ‘nonverbal’ and who have the most significant impairments, learning effective forms of communication has a transformative effect on the individual student, who becomes empowered and more independent. It also has a humanizing effect and shows others that the individual is competent and has his own thoughts and feelings. Thus, teaching communication must be a cornerstone in the education of students with significant disabilities.

One concept that fascinates me is using non-verbal, activity-based ‘conversations’ as a means of developing communication and social-interaction skills for students who are deaf-blind and have limited communication skills. I continue to see a parallel between teaching strategies for students who are deaf-blind and students with autism. I have discovered that with many students, following the child and engaging in physical and sensory activities in conjunction with the child is one of the only ways to establish meaningful and motivating interactions with the student, who is otherwise uninterested in the topics of conversation that I as the teacher deem meaningful, interesting and appropriate.

Thinking about this dynamic raises many deeper questions for me: What is my role in determining how a student should communicate? Should we automatically invalidate a student’s nonverbal or nonsymbolic behaviors because they are not considered socially-appropriate? Who sets the parameters for what is socially-appropriate and acceptable? If people with disabilities are not involved in the process of setting norms of appropriateness, are these norms still valid? The politics of communication is a complicated area.

Tanya Derkash: *The importance of relationships between students and support staff*



“What did she want?” This student wanted to keep her body in movement the entire class period and wanted to be in close proximity to the paraprofessional that she trusts. I found myself thinking a lot about the juxtaposition of a student having tactile defensiveness and then becoming quite dependent on a single adult. This also runs along the lines of training intervenors specifically to work with students with deaf-blindness. Oh, if the school district had money! It would be great to train a variety of people in individual capacities so that the student received a range of support. It seemed to me that this student’s basic wants were met, but it would be great to see her utilize a few signs to communicate even more

wants.

This intervenor has in the past had a tendency to be ‘over the top’ with some students. In working with this student however, he seemed to really know how to facilitate interaction with her outside world. She both knew and trusted him and he truly tried to integrate her into every event and process of the day. By the end of the class I was trying to figure out strategies for getting her to ask for ‘more.’ Possibly interrupting a music or drum routine and then teaching a sign? It is exciting to observe where a student is communicating at the present level and then trying to figure out ways to build on that communication. All in all, this was a great outing to observe and it gave me great joy to see her out of the classroom!

Ted Scott-Smith: *The importance of forming positive relationships with other educators to effect change*

I think one of the best things about this program is the openness and freedom to share and question ideas and methods. I always leave this type of class more creatively inspired and introspective, and I truly feel this process makes me a better teacher. I really thought it was interesting how last week, Liz brought up the defensive reactions of the educators she sometimes works with, and it made me think of how it tied into what David Brown was saying this week. Although “following the child” is so important and by far the most beneficial teaching strategy I’ve come across, I think the way this is taught to other educators and paraprofessionals must be done carefully. The stressful nature of working with an especially challenging group of students seems to create a kind of instinctive defensiveness. I feel like I can say this because I’ve felt it at times, and I’ve seen it in many other teachers. In the same way that we know it is important to slowly and respectfully build relationships with the children we work with, working with adults in the field also needs to be handled with care. Because unless you’ve truly broke down some defensive walls and were able to get a teacher to question their own methods, more likely than not they will go right back to the same dysfunctional teaching strategies, with the end result being no real benefit for the students they work with.

It is important to remember that as special education professionals, our most thoroughly researched, well intentioned work will mean nothing unless it somehow reaches the population we are meant to serve. I feel lucky to be on the “front lines” so to speak daily with my students. It’s extremely gratifying for me to be able to take what I learn at the university level, pass it on to my support staff, and then see it ultimately work to the benefit of the children in my class. Seeing that change is where I get the most personal satisfaction from at this point in my career.

Christeen Treacy: *The importance of working with the child, rather than against.*

One crucial point gained through our last class discussion that should be stressed to those working with special needs and deaf-blind individuals, is to work with the child and not against the child. It seems to be a very simple and common sense idea, but you would be surprised at how long it might take people to realize this approach, if in fact they ever realize this concept. Coupled with working with the child, treating the student with respect and common decency provides a solid foundation for working with children and individuals in general. We did discuss and ask about appropriate strategies one would use with different students abilities/disabilities, but concluded there is no specific strategy to use with certain disabilities because each child/student is different and we as teachers need to interpret what each child’s behavior means and go from there. There is no perfect answer, but together we need to think in different ways. This is a very challenging field and population to work with and figure out appropriate strategies to teach to learn, creating beneficial environments in which to learn in the hopes of increasing quality of life. It can be done. I feel confident that teachers like all of us in this program can make anything happen. Learning from incredibly knowledgeable minds, then teaching what we learn to those around us, as well as, applying what we learn with our students.

Mary Claire Gatmaitan: *asks, What are the right questions? and Where do we look for answers?*

David Brown’s talk was eye-opening because he reminded us to look at students holistically...the topic of “fixing our students” brought up a mix of emotions for me. David agreed that there is a fine line between dangerous behaviors and behaviors that help the student with orientation. He emphasized that the point of his talk is to not only follow the student, but to also pay close attention while observing. More importantly, one should consider all possible reasons for students’ behaviors.

I also enjoyed the description of van Dijk's epiphany that throughout his career he failed to ask the right questions. I think this concept is helpful when working with all students. Before becoming bogged down with a set of limiting answers, one can expand the possibilities by considering the questions. Similarly, Gloria Rodriguez-Gil shared that a teacher failed to recognize that a student had actually initiated a game because the teacher became too focused on the student standing against the wall. Gloria said that this teacher missed an opportunity that may not happen again. Had the teacher followed the student, observed the behaviors closely, and asked the right questions, the teacher may have been more apt to notice what the student was actually doing.

David and Gloria's talks have helped me to think more creatively about all my students, but especially one student in particular. I have not quite figured him out yet, so most of my analysis is based on what I have to work with at school. I try to connect the dots, but like van Dijk, I may not be asking the right questions. Like Gloria's example, I may not be noticing when he is initiating conversations or a game. After David and Gloria's talks I became more aware of my own behavior and what I can do differently to understand my students.

Danielle Fleming: *reminds us of the importance of creativity and patience and respectful support.*

I really enjoyed the lecture and readings on having conversations with students who access the world using means other than speech. A student I once worked with really enjoyed using paint shop on the computer and playing solitaire (though it's hard to say how much she could see, and she was unable to navigate to these programs on her own yet). I went with her to art class in the mornings and her classmates had been making pillows. She refused to touch the materials or check them out at all. So I brought some over to the computer and set up paint shop for her. She chose the color pink as a background and then pulled two big blue squares over it. I laid a pink fabric on her desk and cut out two blue squares for her. She looked at it for a while and then told me that she wanted to leave. The next day, when we came back, she went directly to work at her desk on the pillow! I handed her the scissors and she showed me where she wanted me to cut to make her pillow the right size and then showed me that she wanted one of the squares cut differently. Then she glued the pieces together! It was the most I've gotten her to do this year in that class insofar as having her complete parallel work to her peers. She even ironed her fabric first!

Hand under hand guidance was very helpful in working with this student as it gave her so much more freedom to access things in her own way. Before I began taking the endorsement program classes, I had not heard of this type of guidance. I particularly liked the part of the book that recommended that the guidance, to be even less invasive, be under the two non-dominant fingers.