

Closing Ceremony 2012 “Student Reflections”

by Julie Maier
SFSU-CDBS Endorsement Program Coordinator
and Interns

The following reflections were written by the nine members of our fourth, and final, cohort of students enrolled in the SFSU-CDBS Deaf-Blind Endorsement program. The selections were compiled from reflections written by the students in response to course readings and presentations from CDBS staff as well as fieldwork experiences. We found that each piece selected is a strong representation of each candidate’s unique experiences, philosophies, and approaches to the fields of deaf-blindness and education.



Alyson Furnback reflected upon the ways in which views and behaves towards young adults with significant disabilities as unique individuals were validated through her participation in the endorsement program.

To be completely honest, the way I behave with my students has remained somewhat similar in nature to when I began the CDBS/SFSU endorsement program; however, the way I view my behavior and interactions with my students differs greatly from when I began. The CDBS/SFSU endorsement program coursework has validated the way I feel about and behave with my students. I have always felt a connection with people who are not considered “typical,” I believe this is the reason I was drawn to special education.

During my time at the ARC, I worked with a wide range of abilities, but I was constantly amazed by the creativity and joyful expressions of the clients most significantly impacted by their disabilities. “Joni” who was deafblind, was consistently one of the biggest transformative participants in the class. She was silent, still, and incredibly passive whenever I observed her outside of the dance studio. During class she would smile widely, laugh, sway her arms, clap, and stomp her feet to the rhythm. When it came time for her to create movement, I would hold her hands, follow her rhythm, then let her go, and watch in amazement as she moved. The dance studio we worked in had a sprung floor (this is a common feature in most dance studios, to prohibit dancers from hurting their joints during impactful movement) and amazing acoustics. When the class mimicked Joni’s movements her body and facial expression glowed with joy. The impact of that many people moving together made the room vibrate with rhythm. I knew nothing about working with people with deaf-blindness or sensory disabilities when I started teaching this class. The only thing I knew is that what I was doing felt right.

Over my last five years in special education I occasionally questioned my behavior in my dance class at the ARC and with the students in my current program. I never felt like my original actions were wrong, I just wondered why I observed so many teachers judging and reprimanding students for behaviors I saw as either unique modes of self-preservation or communication. Going through the CDBS/SFSU endorsement program has given me a newfound confidence in how I interact with my students. I often see programs and teachers fighting against their students' abilities instead of capitalizing on them. Learning about the successes educators like Jan van Dijk and the staff of CDBS have had with children affected by severe impairments is a continual inspiration to me. By following their intuition and viewing the child as a whole these educators have made a significant impact on the lives of individuals with disabilities. Participating in this program has reinvigorated my drive to ensure all students, regardless of ability level, receive the acknowledgement, access, and respect they deserve.

Shalane Gargan shares how careful, detailed observation can allow you to learn from the nonverbal behaviors of students and better understand their attempts to communicate and engage in activities with others.

I have always viewed my students in a positive light. However, since having the opportunity to be in the endorsement program, I have come to see some of their unusual behaviors as a way of communicating. I have quite a few students this year that are nonverbal and I have never been exposed to this before. Imagine being the students who are nonverbal: communication is a new and frustrating concept to grasp when you are surrounded by people who already know how to do it! I have students who scream when they are happy and pinch when they are angry. I had to step back and allow these behaviors to happen in order to gain information about how these students are communicating, and think of ways that I can help them communicate effectively and appropriately.

David, Maurice, Julie, and Gloria have taught me to look at every detail of a child; their voice, their emotions, their physical placement, their body language; and put it all together to gain insight on them. I have learned to put myself in their shoes, really take the time to imagine what they are seeing and feeling. I have always thought of myself as an empathetic person, but working with CDBS has made me more aware of my empathy, and at times when I am getting frustrated with a student, this awareness forces me to step back, take a breath and be able to view the world as my students do.



Michelle Kim reflects on her evolution as teacher while in the endorsement program and her commitment to use child-centered approaches and learn equally from her students who have so much to teach others.

In my beginning years as a special education teacher, my teaching style has continued to evolve to best fit the needs of my children and their families. Throughout my invaluable time spent with our deaf-blind cohort, I have learned to better understand how to identify these needs with the ultimate goal of improving each child's quality of life. For every child, these needs look a little different and consequently, David Brown's "Follow the Child" mantra forever resonates with me. In

seeking out the answers to the following questions: “How do you feel? What do you like? What do you want? What do you do?” my behavior with my students has become more child-centered. Lately, I have had a constant awareness of my students’ levels of arousal. I have a very heterogeneous group of students whose levels of arousal vary widely from “drowsy” to “uncontrollable agitation”. In being more aware of these variations and in working with each child a little differently to bring them to a more neutral state, I have been able to foster a more effective, sensory-based environment for my students to engage in more positive behavior across the day. For each child, bringing them to a neutral state looks different. For the child who is uncontrollably agitated, I ask him if he wants to go for a “run” outside with a para then rejoin us for morning meeting. For the child who is drowsy and falling asleep at her desk during work time, I ask her if she wants to work standing up. In learning how to be more flexible with my students, some may view the approach as being “too easy” on the children and being “not strict enough”. In learning how to be more flexible with my students, however, I view the approach as giving my students the power of choice and self-regulation--leading elements for present and future independence.

In taking a more child-centered approach with my students, I view them as my teachers more than ever. They teach me every day that their behaviors--both good and maybe “not so good”--are ways of communicating a message to those around them: “There’s too much for me to do...There’s not enough for me to do...There’s too much noise in the classroom...I don’t trust you...I need to be away from a big group of people...I’m feeling tired today...I’m just really excited today.” I have learned to be a more careful listener and, more so, a more careful observer. As many of my current students and future students with deaf-blindness may not have conventional words to communicate these messages, I have learned the importance of “listening” to my students more through observation, followed by acknowledgement, then a response. In acknowledging each child’s communicative attempts and behaviors, I show him or her that his or her actions have an impact on others around them as well as on their environment. From day to day, I try to foster and model an environment in which each child in my classroom cares for one another and behaves in a way that positively impacts him- or herself along with those around them. If I care, they will care too.



Liz Lemmon reflects on how she now views herself as a “translator” for her students and their unique forms of learning, communicating, and behaving.

When I started the deaf-blind endorsement program, I had no idea just how much the classes would alter my teaching and views of all my students. I had been teaching “reactively;” that is, I responded to my students’ behaviors. Unfortunately, this often meant that I was trying to correct these behaviors. After just a few classes with David and Maurice, I learned how important it is to observe the student. Watch what they are doing. Why are they doing it? They will tell me exactly what they need with their actions and behavior. I now aspire to be a translator for the student. I take what they are saying, whether it is through their behavior or their words, and translate it for everyone else around them. For example, others may not know that “Jose” is crying because his vestibular

sense is working overtime. I can see that he has been trying to balance himself all morning and cannot seem to get comfortable. I want to take this knowledge that I have gained to decipher the language of my students for those around them.

I see my students as their own people. I think that before the program, I grouped my students together, or thought that they could be taught in similar ways. I now see that each student needs their own way to learn, or needs an improved environment in which to learn. I discovered that we all have ways we make up for our sensory needs. I shake my leg when I am feeling antsy. My student “Katy” rocks back and forth when she is getting very excited. There is no reason that I should stop her from doing that. She is expressing herself and helping to soothe her body. Every behavior or action is a form of communication. I think we are often programmed to teach the student the proper way of acting in society. We get lost in why they are doing what they are doing, and immediately try to correct it. I now see that sometimes it is alright to let the student do what they need to do. Let them be comfortable and give themselves what they need.



Karen Nyquist wrote about “opening her eyes” to notice, understand and appreciate the creativity, resiliency, and independence of the high school students she teaches.

This program has really opened my eyes to the innate creativeness that is in each of us. My students have had 14 to 18 years of life in which to find their own ways of meeting their needs and wants and developing methods of communicating these to others. Sometimes, I and other professionals have not understood nor fully appreciated their abilities. My students are survivors who are daily, “24-7,” facing life with challenges that I am learning to understand and appreciate more deeply. My respect for them is growing and I am working to show them this respect. My interactions with them include more turn-taking and more sharing attention on things that interest them. At first, I felt that I would get behind in all that I needed to teach them. But now I see that they are teachers too, teaching me things that I need to know about them as individuals, which ultimately increases their learning and mine.

Soon my students will be adults and will have to transition into the “real world.” I have always worked toward them learning as much as they can and becoming as independent as possible. This program has shown me that it is good for me to back off more often to see how they will approach a task. My prompts come less often, as I see them becoming more mature and independent. Realizing that students who are deaf and blind can learn, graduate, and become productive individuals in society, has encouraged me so much that I am increasingly expecting my students to learn and achieve more.



Melwyn Torres writes about the importance of closely observing students in order to teach and support them to communicate effectively and demonstrate their abilities and independence.

The information and knowledge I gained from the deaf-blind endorsement program have not only made me a better teacher, but a better person. I have learned to be even more understanding to student's behaviors and challenges. Listening to David Brown lecture to closely observe the student and seek from clues what he/she is trying to communicate has given me a better understanding for my students who have severe disabilities. David states that when he goes to observe students that he first closely observes them before making suggestions. I have installed this in my classroom. When my students are having tantrums or expressing dissatisfaction to things, I try to observe for few minutes and take some few pointers on paper as what they are doing and trying to communicate. I then try and find strategies and interventions that will be appropriate to use. Last year I would panic and try to stop the behavior, but this year I have learned to step back, look, listen, follow the student and try and figure out what they are trying to convey. Our students are like puzzles sometimes, where we as teachers need to mix and match and put the pieces together.

I have learned to view my students as individuals who are trying to express and communicate like the rest of us. With the serious challenges they face, they still try to communicate. I also view my students with disabilities as "role-models". Even though they have multiple disabilities, they do not quit and keep trying. When I first started as a paraprofessional, I was always doing things for the students and I did not have patience to wait and let them do things independently. Over the years I have learned to acquire the patience and see that my students do things independently. My expectations for my students are to see that they do things independently.



Marla Raffety wrote about her attempts to teach her students content and skills that will enhance their "quality of life", with a strong emphasis on incorporating "joy" in her class activities and lessons.

I have come to a new realization of what it means to improve the quality of life of a student. I have always tried to educate students with this in mind; however, after listening to Dr. Jan van Dijk, I see that I have been somewhat limited in my definition. van Dijk says we used to think that if we taught students to communicate, they would be fine. Then we saw that they could communicate very well, but they were unhappy. He remarks that joy is not talked about, and asks the question, "What is good quality of life?" He answers that it is to be a positive person, and to have joy in your life. I agree with him, but the obvious question arises: "How do I teach joy?" van Dijk says that we need to supplement the behavioral approach with the attachment approach, and that we need to find a way to release that rewarding chemical. He remarks, "That's the best rewards, and not the token." I think one way to promote joy is to "follow the child"; that is, to empower the child by allowing him or her to determine the flow of the lesson based on his or her own motivators.

I have been researching humor in people with autism because I have a student who thinks it is very funny to switch off the power strip to the computers. Instead of simply seeing this as annoying behavior, I am looking at how I can make this work for him. How can I direct that sense of humor into bringing more joy to everyone, instead of annoyance? Some other questions I have come to ask myself regularly that are related to joy are, "Will this contribute to a more joyful life?" and "Can this be taught in a more joyful way?" When I keep this premise in

mind, I can teach my students functional academic skills that are relevant and will enable them to have as much independence as possible, while at the same time teaching them skills such as positive thinking, humor, and kindness, that will enable them to live joyful lives.

Maya Russell-Nava reflected upon the change in her approach to assessing, teaching, and supporting students from a purely behavioral approach to utilizing a “whole child” approach that builds on the student’s strengths and interests and moves at the student’s pace.

My experience in the deaf-blind endorsement program has definitely changed the way I teach and approach teaching. I started this program as a behaviorist working with children and families in their homes. I was taught, in my trainings, to look at the unwanted behaviors the child was displaying in order to modify them into “wanted” or more appropriate behaviors. I was trained to find the function of the behavior and apply the appropriate reactive and proactive strategy. Now I am able to look at the whole child and not just the behaviors and apply strategies that put the child first and capitalize on the strengths of the child. I try to take into account the whole environment—“Are the lights too bright?,” “Did the child eat that day?” I also try to understand what the child is communicating by displaying these “unwanted” behaviors. This program has helped me to think out of the box, to take into account all our senses (proprioceptive, vestibular, etc) when looking at a student.

The most important thing I have learned, with this child and all my students, is to move SLOW! I now wait and give the student appropriate time to respond. Response time is different for all my students, so I know when to move fast with some and slower with others. Not only does the pace of the classroom slow down, but the energy level of the students slows down as well. This has reduced maladaptive behaviors dramatically!

Stephen Tinelli reflects on changing in his teaching practice that incorporates student-centered approaches and his perceptions of students as “inventors” who do not need to be changed, but need to be listened to and respected for their uniqueness.

I can remember when I was starting out as a paraprofessional I would observe students doing a task and then quickly react to what it was they were doing. If the student were completing a task in a way that was maybe not the most efficient way I would intervene and try to “correct” the student. With this came lots of frustration because the student I was working with didn’t want to change, but I wanted to show them how to do it more efficiently, even though the final outcome would be the same. In these situations I have now become more hands off and use more observation. Trying to figure out the reason why the student is doing it the way he or she is. Maybe it’s more comfortable? More rewarding? Or maybe it’s just the way the student likes to do things? Expression is often very difficult for most of my students and, for that matter, people in general. My students would almost never turn to me after being corrected and say something like, “It’s just the way I do things” or “I feel more comfortable when I do things this way”.

Knowing that most students aren't going to express themselves I have to look for those expressions in different ways. Sometimes that means I must be hands-off, but sometimes that means I have to be more hands-on. If a student isn't going to tell me what they are thinking, then I need to try and figure out what it is they're thinking. This means I may need to try their way in order to fully grasp why it is the student is doing it a certain way. For example I have a student who sorts the school's attendance. He always sorts the days in order, which to me seems inefficient. So one day I tried his way. I found that, although still uncomfortable to me, I could focus more on the day I was looking for. Only looking for Monday made it easier for me to find Monday. So instead of "correcting" the student, I now simply allow the student to complete the task in his own way. I would have never figured this out if I had quickly reacted to his way of doing things.

I now view my students more as inventors. Because I have a better understanding that people don't just do things, they do things for a reason. Like to gain balance, stability, pleasure, or consistency to name a few. If I can find the source of why a student is spitting or flapping their hands or stomping their feet, then I can share that information with the people that the student comes in the most contact with. Once people have a better understanding of why a person does what it is they do, I have found that people are more willing to accept the behavior the student is doing. For example, he stomps his feet because he is trying to give himself pressure which will help him calm him down.

My students come up with techniques most teachers call "behaviors", which are usually found to be odd or different. But I think that everything at one time was odd. When something is new it is usually odd because people aren't use to it. But the more a person does something or if they see other people doing something then it becomes more "normalized". By viewing my students as inventors and figuring out the reasons why the student is doing whatever it is they do I can then help the student explain that reason to other people which will hopefully allow the student to be more accepted.