Gift of the Present - Attention
Update on the CDBS-SFSU 5th Annual Deafblindness Symposium

“Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity.”
~Simone Weil, French educator, philosopher, mystic, and political activist

On Saturday, October 15th CDBS held their 5th Annual Deafblindness Symposium. This annual event held each fall provides an opportunity for ongoing professional development training for current and former graduates of the San Francisco State University Specialization Program in Deafblindness program. The symposium attendees are current and former students from the Moderate-Severe Disabilities Program at SFSU who have sought additionally training in the education of students with deafblindness. Through the partnership between CDBS and SFSU’s Moderate-Severe Disabilities program more than 40 students have graduated with these additional specialized competencies to assess, teach and support students who are deafblind.

Our annual symposium also provides former students a chance to reconnect and the opportunity for current students to meet former graduates who are now teaching in the field. Three years ago a former graduate offered to welcome the new cohort that fall and this has now become a symposium tradition. This year Kayla Kenton, from South San Francisco Unified School District, and Melwyn Torres, from Marysville Unified School District, provided the honorary welcome to the seven students in our current 7th cohort in the Specialization in Deafblindness program.

Our guest presenter this year was Dr. Robin Greenfield from the Center on Disabilities and Human Development at the University of Idaho. She is also the project director for the Idaho Project for Children and Youth with Deaf-Blindness. Robin shared with the symposium attendees her recent interest in and findings related to attention, factors that affect our attention, and, most importantly, how those factors affect a student who is deafblind with additional disabilities and emerging communication skills. Her presentation, Why aren’t you paying attention? Influences and outcomes, provided us
the opportunity consider and discuss the factors that influence a student's attention and, subsequently, their ability to engage, interact, and learn in our classes.

Some key areas Robin addressed included: different types of attention; the importance of recognizing a student's bio-behavioral states, or arousal levels, and ability to self-regulate those states; use of careful observation to determine the student's preferred pace, motivators or interests; consideration of fatigue and health concerns, and physical support needs; and types of distractions and interruptions and other environmental factors that make an attentive state difficult to reach or sustain. Robin led the participants in some fun and interesting activities that served as strong reminders of how difficult it can be to achieve and maintain attention given the many distractions, interruptions and multi-tasking that occurs on an almost constant basis in our lives.

It seemed everyone left the symposium with a renewed appreciation for the energy and effort our students with deafblindness expend in order to make sense of their world and make connections with others and with plenty of practical tips for ensuring we are supporting our students’ efforts to attend and engage with others and their environment. Robin will be presenting on this topic again at the Deafblind International Conference in Aalborg, Denmark in September, 2017 with our former colleague, David Brown.