

When the Sleep-Shades Aren't On

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Abstract

This article explores the importance of those experiences outside of normal training hours in a Structured Discovery-based orientation center, during which time sleep-shades are not utilized by Center students. Consideration is given to questions which are frequently asked regarding the reasons why the wearing of sleep-shades is not usually required beyond the regular training hours. While the break from sleep-shades promotes the integration of available vision with non-visual alternative techniques, students are at the same time discouraged from using their residual vision to assist other students or blind staff members. This article strives to clarify the reasons for these practices, and to assist instructors working in the Structured Discovery environment to be able to provide their students with a greater degree of understanding of the program goals.

Introduction

While there are many very good reasons for the use of the sleep-shades during Center training, there are also situations that can create confusion for students. It is not unusual for people to wonder why the sleep-shades are used at all; in fact, there have been many who strongly oppose their use, and for these reasons there have already been several articles written to address these concerns (Olson, 1982; Mettler, 1997; Omvig, 2002 and 2005). The Nebraska Center for the Blind is firmly committed to the use of sleep-shades as a teaching tool because years of experience have shown that this approach to training leads to a higher level of independence and success; therefore the Center requires that students wear their sleep-shades eight hours a day, five days a week. On the other hand, this can sometimes lead to questions as to why students are not required to wear them throughout their waking hours if they are such an important part of the learning process. This certainly opens up many other questions, especially knowing that Center students with some degree of usable vision will tend to use it when it is available to them (Olson, 1982; Mettler, 1997). For this reason this article was prepared with the intent of answering some of these questions.

There are actually two answers to the question regarding those times when students are not required to use the shades. It simply wouldn't be comfortable for students to wear the sleep-shades for such extensive periods, and it is recognized that there is a physical need to have a break from the shades. The second reason is in fact an important part of the learning process: Center students need to learn to incorporate the use of their developing non-visual skills with their usable vision. Each student needs to come to understand those situations in which their vision works well and those situations in which the better choice would be to utilize the non-visual alternatives. This understanding cannot be determined by anyone other than the individual student, and it is just as important as developing a complete set of non-visual techniques (Olson, 1982; Mettler, 1997).

Other questions include:

Why are students with a high degree of usable vision required to use their canes when they are not wearing their sleep-shades?

Why are students with relatively high levels of vision discouraged from using their vision to work with the computer at the apartments?

Why should a student who does not have enough vision to read print have to go to the trouble of arranging for a sighted reader when there are other Center students available at the apartments who have enough vision to read print and are willing to help out with the readings?

Why should a student with some useful vision not use his or her vision to assist a totally blind student or a staff person with finding a dropped object, locating a chair, announcing when a traffic light has changed to green, or setting an alarm clock?

Does this mean that the staff of the Center believes that blind people with some vision shouldn't use their vision?

Rationale

As confusing as the Center's policies may appear to be at first, there are very good reasons for each of them. While the overall goal of any rehabilitation training program is to prepare individuals to obtain appropriate employment, one of the most important purposes of Center training is to assist agency clients to become experts in their own blindness. This means being able to make informed choices regarding techniques they will use in their everyday lives as well as in the workplace. For some situations a visually-based alternative may be more efficient, while others may be better accomplished using a non-visual method (Olson, 1982). An individual cannot make an appropriate choice of techniques unless that person becomes well-practiced with those methods that would otherwise be unfamiliar. Most often, since the majority of people rely on their vision for the tasks of everyday life or in the workplace, the less-familiar techniques tend to be those that are non-visual in nature. It is only when an individual has truly mastered the less-familiar non-visual techniques that a balanced comparison can be made with the more-familiar and socially accepted visually-based methods (Jernigan, 1961).

During Center training, students are expected to use their canes at all times except when they are in their own apartments. The reasons for this policy are simple and important. First of all, individuals with limited vision need to learn which method of gathering information is most effective in their personal situation—the cane and its related non-visual techniques, or their eyesight. They must also learn to use both sources of information in concert with each other. This means learning through experience, making mistakes, and experimenting to find the best combination of these skills. Cane travel is a skill that requires practice, and the time in Center classes simply doesn't provide enough practice alone. In addition, each individual must come to terms with the social issues that using a cane can create. The general public tends to react to a person with a white cane and often these reactions are socially awkward, ranging from being excessively helpful to outright strange. When it becomes apparent that the blind individual has some useful vision, the interaction can be even more uncomfortable, causing the blind person to feel self-conscious even if most people do not react at all. Using the cane in nearly every situation provides Center students with the experience to make good judgments regarding which skills best meet their needs, to learn to blend visual and non-visual skills together effectively, to refine their cane techniques, and to develop positive responses to even the most awkward of social situations related to their blindness.

The experiences that students have while staying at the apartments are as much a part of the training as are the classes during the week. Developing new skills, such as operating a computer using synthesized speech and keyboard commands, require far more extensive practice than can be provided in classes. For this reason, a computer is provided for students to use in the apartments and often homework assignments are given by Center instructors. For example, students who employ their vision to work with the computer, whether it involves a screen enlargement program or not, are not practicing the non-visual techniques and may even tend to compare their well-developed visually-based computer skills with their very limited experience with the use of keyboard commands and listening skills. It would be very easy for these students to become convinced that using a computer visually is a superior method, even though in reality many non-visual computer techniques are much more efficient. It is also not uncommon for a student with some useful vision to attempt to assist a student who is unable to visually read the computer screen. The problem with this seemingly kind gesture is that neither student learns the non-visual techniques to accomplish the task.

Learning how to obtain and work with a sighted reader is one of the most important skills that a blind person can develop. When other Center students jump in to help with reading for other students, they are denying them the opportunity to learn many aspects of this skill. Even more troubling, this could reinforce in the minds of both students the notion that the more vision a person has, the better off that person is. The truth can be very easily overlooked, because the other characteristics that are truly responsible for a person's success are not considered. A well-educated, highly skilled, and motivated blind person is much more likely to be successful than any apathetic individual with eyesight who has not had the opportunity for education or to develop critically important skills; and therefore it is not vision that determines the outcome, but rather all of the experiences and characteristics that are a part of that person's makeup (Olson, 1982; Jernigan, 1961; Omgvig, 2002 and 2005).

Conclusion

Each of the skills that are part of Center training—including finding a dropped object, locating a chair, knowing when a traffic signal has changed, or correctly setting an alarm clock—are the sorts of daily tasks that underpin an individual's independence. Every Center student needs to find the best alternatives to accomplish these sorts of tasks if he or she is going to be able to live in the world and be a contributing member of society. Nonetheless, there is something much deeper at work here, which is the need to believe in the ability of all blind people. When an individual with vision performs a task for someone with less vision, it takes away the sense that functioning as a blind person is not only possible but of equal merit (Jernigan, 1961 and 1993; Omgvig, 2005, p. 210–234). When a student with some vision steps in to assist a blind staff member, it takes away the opportunity for that staff person to role-model the non-visual techniques and attitudes necessary to be successful as a blind person.

The emphasis on the development of non-visual techniques can sometimes cause some clients and others to misinterpret the intended purpose of the agency's approach to training, leaving them with the impression that staff members are opposed to the use of low-vision techniques and devices. The philosophy of the Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired actually promotes the use of low-vision techniques and devices in the appropriate circumstances (Olson, 1982). In fact, the agency was for many years a major sponsor of the low-vision clinic at the University of Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha and continues to purchase low-vision devices when appropriate for meeting the needs of individual clients. Also, the NCBVI field staff has received training in appropriate low-vision assessment techniques and services for working with agency clients, especially in regard to the senior blind.

There is one critical aspect of the philosophy of the agency that allows the non-visual Structured Discovery training model to work effectively with low-vision techniques and devices. This is related to the manner and timing in which low-vision-related methods are introduced to consumers. Vision is such a compelling sense—based both on social acceptance and personal familiarity—that people will tend to focus their attention on the use of their vision if low-vision techniques and devices are introduced too early in the rehabilitation process. This focus on visually-based techniques and devices can create a sense that the challenges related to vision loss are best addressed through these methods—when in fact some, if not the majority, of the individual's daily tasks may well be completed more efficiently, effectively, and safely through non-visual alternatives (Olson, 1982).

Informed choice is a critical aspect of successful rehabilitation, and only a consumer who is fully knowledgeable regarding the complete range of possible non-visual and low-vision alternative techniques can make a truly informed choice regarding which technique will best meet the needs of a given situation. The only way to be truly informed regarding non-visual techniques is through developing a mastery of these skills so that a fair comparison can be made with the more familiar visually-based skills. This proper development of new non-visual alternatives is unlikely should an individual be provided with very appealing low-vision techniques before the non-visual techniques are fully developed. The consumer would be likely to mistakenly assume that no further skill development is needed. For this reason, the Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired emphasizes the development of non-visual skills before low-vision alternatives are introduced. Throughout this process, individual needs and abilities are considered, and the approaches to training are adjusted through informed choice so that these needs are most appropriately met. Center training, for example, is a choice, which is intended to specifically assist consumers to develop the highest level of proficiency in the complete complement of non-visual skills, and thus low-vision training and devices are simply not a part of this program. An individual who makes the choice to use low-vision-based alternatives can be referred through the agency to a qualified low-vision specialist, home-based instruction, or other training resources. It should also be pointed out that developing effective non-visual techniques through Structured Discovery learning experiences can actually enhance an individual's use of low-vision. This is the case because using non-visual techniques—for example, the long white cane to avoid obstacles—can free up the person's vision to be used for locating useful landmarks at a distance or observing the movements of other pedestrians. Also, the highly developed problem solving skills that result from Structured Discovery learning experiences can directly improve an individual's ability to learn to use the available visual information more efficiently and effectively.

Being blind really means that an individual does not have reliable eyesight; therefore, the individual needs to devise an effective and efficient set of alternative techniques in order to successfully perform the majority of his or her daily tasks. Individuals with some usable vision who also have a highly refined set of non-visual skills have the ability to seamlessly transition from visually-based techniques to those that do not require vision whenever conditions are adverse to the use of their vision. Those persons who primarily rely on low-vision techniques may simply not have the ability to adapt effectively or safely to conditions that are adverse to the use of their eyesight (Olson, 1982, Mettler, 1997).

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